

**Modernism for the Masses:
Painters, Politics, and Public Murals in New Deal New York**

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Declaration

I, Jody Patterson, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

This research project is the first comprehensive study to address the relations between modern art, leftist politics, and the New Deal federal art initiatives in New York City during the turbulent years of the Great Depression. While this period in American art is largely associated with the dominance of figurative works and the promotion of what was perceived as a tradition of native realism, the art scene was considerably more factional and complex than canonical narratives indicate. Significantly, the use of a modernist visual vocabulary was not nearly so marginal as current art-historical scholarship continues to suggest.

This project explores the ways in which artists with varying degrees of commitment to the left, such as Stuart Davis, Arshile Gorky, and Balcomb Greene, negotiated a rapprochement between modernist aesthetics and leftist politics within a complex cultural field deeply divided by contending ideologies. Specifically, it examines these relations with respect to public muralism, an artform that underwent a significant transformation during the decade, emerging as a vital manifestation of revolutionary popular art and serving as an exemplary means of bringing art to the people. In an effort to offer some corrective to the inadequacy of received notions of 1930s public art the primary goals of this study are two-fold: to analyze the ways in which artists negotiated the political mandates of the Communist Party, the Popular Front, and the New Deal state in order to fuse modernist artistic practices and leftist politics; and to examine the ways in which both Roosevelt's New Deal and the Communist Party's Popular Front were politically and ideologically able to accommodate the development of modernism, particularly within the context of the Public Works of Art Project (1933-1934) and the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (1935-1943).

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Introduction

In the midst of a turbulent decade ushered in by the stock market crash of 1929 and the subsequent onset of the Great Depression, Stuart Davis, one of America's most sophisticated modernists and ardent leftist activists, was nonetheless optimistic about the role to be played by the modern artist during a period of acute social, political, and cultural upheaval. Writing in May 1935, some three months prior to the inauguration of the New Deal administration's Federal Art Project, he was palpably confident that "If the historical process is forcing the artist to relinquish his individualist isolation and come into the arena of life problems, it may be the abstract artist who is best equipped to give vital artistic expression to such problems — because he [sic] has already learned to abandon the ivory tower in his objective approach to his materials."¹ Only five years later, on the eve of US entry into World War II and the phasing out of government patronage for the arts, his disillusionment was unmistakable as he tersely averred that "There's nothing like a good solid ivory tower for the production of art."²

The stark disjunction between these two statements invites a host of questions and suggests that in the interval that separates them a lot had changed. Indeed, the New York art world during this period was markedly different from its postwar incarnation and was animated by a range of possibilities and, ultimately, disappointments that remain unprecedented in the history of American art. Embracing Michael Leja's assertion that "works of art are often sites where the issues or questions a community or culture finds urgent, fundamental, or troublesome are elaborated and negotiated," it is the purpose of this study to explore the relations between modern art, leftist politics, and the New Deal federal art initiatives during the 1930s.³ It proceeds from the contention that while this era in American art is largely associated with the dominance of figurative works and the promotion of what was perceived as a tradition of native realism, the use of a modernist visual vocabulary was not nearly so marginal as current

¹ Stuart Davis, "A Medium of Two Dimensions," *AF* 1.5 (May 1935), p. 6.

² Davis papers, 2 June 1940, Archives, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.; all references to the Davis papers refer to this collection.

³ Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expression: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 1.

art-historical scholarship continues to suggest. Specifically, by examining the ways in which artists such as Davis, Arshile Gorky, and Balcomb Greene negotiated a rapprochement between modernist aesthetics and leftist politics, I want to demonstrate that the New York art scene of the 1930s was considerably more factional and complex than canonical narratives indicate.

Rationale

According to standard accounts of American culture institutionalized during the postwar era, the history of twentieth-century art sweeps in a single stroke from the figurative paintings of the 1930s, to the spontaneous gestures of the Abstract Expressionists in the 1940s.⁴ Few studies grant serious scholarly attention to the presence of a modern art community in the thirties, and when they do, it is often only to tease out those threads that provide continuous connections with the seemingly ineluctable apotheosis of the New York School.⁵ This history is, of course, very crude but, as Peter Wollen points out, it has a certain logic, one “founded on the idea that the destiny of American modernism was to make a clean break with a persistent, indigenous attachment to realism, in order to overtake and surpass an exhausted French modernism.”⁶ Within this art-historical framework, engagements with modernism prior to the ascendancy of Abstract Expressionism have been relegated to the status of pre-history and are largely denigrated and dismissed as lacking any aesthetic or historical importance. While studies of Depression-era modernism do exist, such as Nancy Troy’s unpublished work on the murals commissioned for the Williamsburg Housing Project and the Newark Museum’s exhibition catalogue on Gorky’s murals for the Newark Airport, the scope of these texts is necessarily limited in reach and they fail to adequately address the broader relations between modernism,

⁴ The seductive logic of this teleology characterizes a number of canonical texts on American art, including, Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Praeger, 1970); Dore Ashton, *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning* (1973; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); and Barbara Rose, *American Painting: The Twentieth Century* (New York: Skira, 1973).

⁵ See, for example, Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

⁶ Peter Wollen, “Modernities and Realities,” *Views from Abroad: European Perspectives on American Art 3* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1997), p. 14.

the left, and the New Deal state.⁷ The major work on the period remains Susan Larsen and John Lane's *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America, 1927-1944*, a substantial text published in 1983 in conjunction with an exhibition at the Carnegie Institute's Museum of Art.⁸ This study offers the most useful overview of modern and abstract practices in the 1930s, covering more than forty artists and including essays by Lane and Larsen that synthesize much of the then current research on the period. What is remarkable in this instance is the distinct lack of impact it had; while one might have hoped that such a contribution would have set the agenda for future scholarship, opening the field to new approaches and interpretations, the challenge was not taken up.

More recently Barbara Haskell's analysis of leftist artists in the 1930s in the Whitney Museum of American Art's *The American Century: Art and Culture, 1900-1950* (1999) is limited to a discussion of Social Realism, with her examination of the modernist community tendentiously linking abstraction to "a utopian vision of universal harmony," thereby yoking modern form to an idealist rather than a

⁷ Nancy J. Troy, "The Williamsburg Housing Project Murals and the Polemic of Abstraction in American Painting of the 1930s," MA thesis, Yale University, 1976 and Ruth Bowman, *Murals Without Walls: Arshile Gorky's Aviation Murals Rediscovered* (Newark, N.J.: Newark Museum, 1978). See also Greta Berman, *The Lost Years: Mural Painting in New York City under the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project, 1935-1943* (New York: Garland, 1978), pp. 136-167. This latter text was Berman's PhD thesis; her research is presented in brief in "Abstractions for Public Spaces, 1935-43," *Arts* 56.10 (June 1982), pp. 81-86.

⁸ John R. Lane and Susan C. Larsen, *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America, 1927-1944* (Pittsburgh/New York: Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute/Harry N. Abrams, 1983); this was followed by Virginia Mecklenburg, *The Patricia and Phillip Frost Collection: American Abstraction, 1930-1945* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, 1989). Studies of individual artists include: *Ilya Bolotowsky* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1974); *Restructured Reality: The 1930s Paintings of Francis Criss* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery, 2001); *Burgoyne Diller* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1990); *Suzy Frelinghuysen and George L. K. Morris. American Abstract Artists: Aspects of their Work and Collection* (Williamstown, Mass.: Williams College Museum of Art, 1992); *The Art of Balcomb Greene* (New York: Horizon Press, 1977); *Hananiah Harari: A Personal Synthesis* (Montclair, N.J.: Montclair Art Museum, 1997); *Paul Kelp: Abstractions and Constructions, 1925-1940* (Champaign: Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1990); *Jan Matulka, 1890-1972* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1980); and *Jan Matulka: The Global Modernist* (Montclair, N.J.: Montclair Art Museum, 2004). The literature on Davis and Gorky is considerable and will be addressed in what follows.

materialist perspective while simultaneously evacuating its critical potential.⁹ And while the Open University's *Varieties of Modernism* (2004) does offer a limited treatment of the role played by committed leftists such as Davis, who insistently championed the use of modernist practices during the decade, the discussion concludes by emphasizing the "significant continuities underlying the apparently very different styles of Social Realism and Abstract Expressionism."¹⁰ Such interpretive habits continue to miss much of what was most aesthetically and ideologically radical during the period.

A potentially more disturbing, if not unexpected, omission occurs in *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (2004), the latest canonical survey of the development of Western modernism and its aftermath by members of the influential *October* group. Whereas *Varieties of Modernism* dedicates an entire chapter to the move from realism to modernism in the period from the 1930s to the 1950s, *Art Since 1900* (a 704-page tome) all but ignores American artistic developments during the 1930s, with its discussion limited to a scant treatment of the New Deal art initiatives focusing on the work of photographers such as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange with the Farm Security Administration.¹¹ Revealing much about the particular values that have sustained the predominant position from which histories of twentieth-century American art have been constructed, the politicization of artists in the US during the decade is all but overlooked and important modernists such as Davis and Gorky are relegated to a section on the *depoliticization* of the American avant-garde in the early 1940s.¹² While the influence of the left on artists more generally has received scholarly attention, including Andrew Hemingway's watershed study *Artists on the*

⁹ Barbara Haskell, *The American Century: Art and Culture, 1900-1950*, vol. 1 (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art/Norton, 1999); the relevant chapters are "Social Realism" and "The American Abstract Art Community," pp. 278-283 and 284-295 respectively.

¹⁰ Pam Meecham, "Realism and Modernism" in Paul Wood, ed., *Varieties of Modernism* (New Haven and London: Open University/Yale University Press, 2004), p. 111; on Davis see p. 80 and pp. 96-97. This text, along with others in the series, is reviewed by Warren Carter in "A Collective Review of the Open University's Course AA318: 'Art of the Twentieth Century,'" *Radical Art Caucus Newsletter* 4 (February 2006), pp. 16-22.

¹¹ Hal Foster, et al., *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), pp. 276-280. The June 2006 issue of *Art Bulletin* includes five reviews of the text; see pp. 289-373.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 293-295.

Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956, the impact of the left on modernists is less well understood and remains almost entirely unexplored.¹³

While these may seem old issues now, they have yet to be fully worked out. This study will thus address the relations between modernist artistic practices and leftists politics through the example of muralism. Seeking to offer some corrective to what Anthony Lee describes as “the inaccuracy of our received notion of ‘1930s public art,’” I will focus on the modernist murals executed under the auspices of two New Deal cultural initiatives, namely the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) (1933-1934) and the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP) (1935-1943).¹⁴ The primary corpus to be examined comprises murals executed by the New York Mural Division for the Newark Airport (1935-1937); the Williamsburg Housing Project (1935-1938); and the New York World’s Fair (1939-1940). Almost entirely ignored within the history of twentieth-century American art, these murals afford an opportunity to explore the ways in which leftists navigated an artistic field divided by contending ideologies around such issues as Americanism, realism, and modernism itself.

¹³ Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002). Earlier studies include David Shapiro, ed., *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon* (New York: Ungar, 1973); Patricia Hill, et al., *Social Concern and Urban Realism: American Painting of the 1930s* (Boston: Boston University/Bread and Roses, 1983); and Cécile Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989). With regard to the latter see Hemingway, “Fictional Unities: ‘Antifascism’ and ‘Antifascist Art’ in 30s America,” *OAJ* 14.1 (1991), pp. 107-117. With respect to modernists on the left there are two exceptions here: Ad Reinhardt and Stuart Davis. On Reinhardt during this period see Michael Corris, *Ad Reinhardt* (London: Reaktion, 2008), which is based on the research for “Corrected Chronology: Ad Reinhardt and the American Communist Movement — 1936-1950,” PhD thesis, University College London, 1996, a portion of which appears in “The Difficult Freedom of Ad Reinhardt” in John Roberts, ed., *Art Has No History! The Making and Unmaking of Modern Art* (New York: Verso, 1994), pp. 63-110. Sources on Davis that discuss his art and politics include: Lowery Stokes Sims, et al., *Stuart Davis: American Painter* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991), pp. 56-81; Patricia Hills, *Stuart Davis* (Washington, D.C.: Harry N. Abrams/National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1996), pp. 89-119; Karen Wilkin, *Stuart Davis*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987), pp.127-160; John R. Lane, *Stuart Davis: Art and Theory* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1978), pp. 33-40; and Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, pp. 174-176. While Whiting has also written on Davis’s art and politics during the 1930s in her *Antifascism in American Art*, pp. 65-97, it should be noted that her analysis is mistaken in several aspects; see Lane’s essay in *Stuart Davis: American Painter*, note 2, p. 80. Hemingway also deals with Whiting’s treatment of Davis in his “Fictional Unities,” pp. 113-114.

¹⁴ Anthony Lee, *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco’s Public Murals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 128.

Modernism

A frequently invoked term in cultural history, ‘modernism’ is one of the most “semantically mobile” and “febrile” labels.¹⁵ Given that it encompasses a multiplicity of meanings, something needs to be said about its usage in this study. Taking issue with the imprecision of the term itself, Perry Anderson forcefully argues that “Modernism as a notion is the emptiest of all cultural categories. Unlike the terms Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, Mannerist, Romantic or Neo-Classical, it designates no describable object in its own right at all . . . [and] what is concealed beneath the label is a wide variety of very diverse — indeed incompatible — aesthetic practices.”¹⁶ Although there is much to recommend in Anderson’s argument, and while it is next to impossible to distil an overall style, temper, or manner from the manifold practices the term denotes, it is nonetheless inconceivable to dispense with the term altogether. Rather than being hopelessly “vacant” and “vitiated” as Anderson contends, the word is still useful in referring to a set of practices, at least within a genealogy of painting, that are linked by a constellation of shared formal concerns.¹⁷ While these concerns are justified from a variety of often contradictory political and ideological positions, with some approaches manifesting radical reactions to others, the heightened attention to aesthetic form characteristic of modernism lends it at least some degree of coherence as a conceptual category, regardless of the innumerable cracks such a label papers over. At any rate, what is important here is what artists and critics meant by modernism during the 1930s.

While there was little, if any, consensus on what it meant to be aesthetically ‘modern,’ the term was appreciably more expansive than in its more familiar postwar guise. The label did not merely indicate concern with formal values; in fact, by the early 1930s the majority of critics, including Alfred H. Barr, Jr., were advocating a move away from “pure” art and formal experimentation towards a renewed “regard for the values

¹⁵ Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds, *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature, 1890-1930* (1976; London: Penguin, 1991), p. 22; see also Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

¹⁶ Perry Anderson, “Modernity and Revolution,” *New Left Review* 144 (March-April 1984), p. 113.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

of objective observation.”¹⁸ As Forbes Watson, editor of the progressive magazine *The Arts*, contended in April 1927: “While fifteen years ago many American painters tried their hands at the experiments then current in European art, the development of modernism in America has receded from pure abstractions toward realism.”¹⁹ Not incidentally, and as Watson’s assessment suggests, discussions of modernism foregrounding the need to cultivate a closer engagement with the surrounding world were tied to broader cultural preoccupations with the issue of “Americanism” and the perceived need to establish an indigenous strain of modernism, one “weaned from its French mother.”²⁰ As a result, the category of modernism was often extended to include artists such as Edward Hopper, Charles Burchfield, and Reginald Marsh, with this version of the ‘modern’ receiving strong institutional support from both the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) (established in 1929) and the Whitney Museum of American Art (which evolved out of the Whitney Studio Club in 1931) — a fact made clear in that artists such as Hopper enjoyed continued patronage throughout the 1930s in the form of purchases and exhibitions.²¹ By extension, for artists such as Davis, whose use of the term was more circumscribed, it operated roughly as shorthand for the School of Paris and included, but was not necessarily equivalent to, abstraction.

¹⁸ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Eakins-Homer-Ryder* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1930), n. p.

¹⁹ Forbes Watson, “The Academy Attempts to Make Hay,” *The Arts* 11.4 (April 1927), p. 194. Watson served as editor from 1923 until the magazine’s demise in 1931. The magazine was sponsored by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (the eponymous institution’s patron) and the editorial board included liberals such as Leo Stein and Lloyd Goodrich, who joined the Whitney staff in 1930, later being appointed director.

²⁰ Edward Hopper, “John Sloan and the Philadelphians,” *The Arts* 11.4 (April 1927), p. 177.

²¹ See, for example, Hopper, “Charles Burchfield: American,” *The Arts* 14.1 (July 1928), p. 5 and Goodrich, “The Paintings of Edward Hopper,” *The Arts* 11.3 (March 1927), p. 137. For an analysis of the critical discourse surrounding Hopper and notions of Americanness during the 1920s and 1930s see Hemingway, “To ‘Personalize the Rainpipe’: The Critical Mythology of Edward Hopper,” *Prospects* 17 (1992), pp. 379–404. In addition to dozens of other exhibitions mounted during the 1930s Hopper was given a solo show at the Whitney in 1931 and a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1933. It should also be noted that while this style of painting constituted one possible aesthetic configuration of ‘American’ modernism, there were other alternatives. For example, a group of artists gathered around Edward Stieglitz offered an alternative model. Coming of age during the Progressive Era, the Stieglitz circle remained a force in the ever-more protean New York art world well into the 1930s and 1940s. See Paul Rosenfeld’s *Port of New York: Essays on Fourteen American Moderns* (1924; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961) and, more recently, Marcia Brennan, *Painting Gender, Constructing Theory: The Alfred Stieglitz Circle and American Formalist Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001).

Realism

In assessing whether modernist muralism fulfilled the requirements of a 'social' art as demanded by those on the left, while simultaneously meeting New Deal requirements for an art that was both 'democratic' and aligned with the imperatives of indigenous American expression, I also want to explore the relations between modernism and realism during the 1930s. Significantly, modernism is often used to demarcate a break with realist traditions, with the latter associated with political engagement in contrast to the perceived "ivory tower" stance of the former. One of the major objectives of this study is to offer an alternative to the continuing opposition between these categories. As Janet Wolff contends: "The opposition modernism/realism does not necessarily hold up in particular cases, nor is it always helpful as a general (or historical) framework for analysis."²² The penchant to divide the artistic field in this way is, at least in the case of artists such as Davis and Gorky, misconceived. Not only are these categories overdetermined and in need of unpacking, but such a simplistic polarization presents insurmountable problems of interpretation. Tellingly, this division is usually made in the context of a Cold War art history seeking to establish a distance from the realist art of the 1930s and its overriding connections to Stalinist politics. However, while scholars have sought to downplay the realist aspects of the approaches adopted by Davis and Gorky during this period, the centrality of realism to their artistic practices should not be obscured by the narrow focus and limited criteria of assessment associated with Greenbergian formalism. While their murals exist at a considerable distance from anything we typically take to be realist, evaluations of their art from the standpoint of form alone render it next to impossible to understand their approach to modernism, or to reconcile their painting with their politics.

²² Janet Wolff, *AngloModern: Painting and Modernity in Britain and the United States* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 160. Other scholars have made much the same point; see, for example, David Peters Corbett and Lara Perry, eds, *English Art, 1914-1960: Modern Artists and Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 2; Brendan Prendeville, *Realism in 20th-Century Painting* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), p. 5; Paul Wood, "Realism and Realities" in Briony Fer, David Batchelor, Paul Wood, eds, *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press/Open University, 1993), p. 254; Esther Leslie, "Interrupted Dialogues of Realism and Modernism" in Matthew Beaumont, ed., *Adventures in Realism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 125-141; Wollen "Modernities and Realities," pp. 13-19; and Meecham, "Realism and Modernism," p. 75.

To deem an art practice ‘realist’— not unlike labelling it ‘modernist’— is to enter an interpretive sphere of extraordinary variation and the term is, as Raymond Williams observes, “highly variable and inherently complex.”²³ Moreover, while it is widely held that the purpose of all realisms is to “show things as they really are” such an assertion “does not end but only begins a controversy.”²⁴ But as Roman Jakobson warns, “By failing to distinguish among the variety of concepts latent in the term ‘realism,’ . . . historians of art . . . are acting as if the term were a bottomless sack into which everything and anything could conveniently be hidden away.”²⁵ Indeed, as Terry Lovell notes, “Realism in art is almost as old as art itself” and differing approaches have “arisen in specific historical circumstances,” with each taking “its meaning as much from the practices to which it was opposed, as from practices common to all realisms.”²⁶ As such, Davis’s claims for a realist practice need to be distinguished from other models pursued contemporaneously, namely those associated with the Social Realist, American Scene, and Regionalist painters.

One of Davis’s most trenchant formulations on this distinction appeared in his 1939 essay “Abstract Painting Today.”²⁷ As he made clear, while he shared the political outlook of artists such as Ben Shahn and Philip Evergood, he did not believe that the only possible engagement with social content was through a depiction of it, and he did not want his art to function as a form of propaganda. For him, an artist was not merely an observer, nor was realism premised upon directly mirroring the world. His harshest criticism, however, was reserved for artists such as Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry whose works he vehemently denounced as “domestic

²³ Raymond Williams, “A Lecture on Realism,” *Screen* 18.1 (Spring 1977), p. 61.

²⁴ Williams, “Realism,” *Keywords* (London: Fontana, 1983), p. 259.

²⁵ Roman Jakobson, “On Realism in Art” in Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska, eds, *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1971), p. 45.

²⁶ Terry Lovell, *Pictures of Reality: Aesthetics, Politics and Pleasure* (London: BFI Publishing 1980), p. 64.

²⁷ Davis, “Abstract Painting Today” in Francis V. O’Connor, ed., *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973), pp. 121-127. Davis’s text is one of a remarkable collection of testimonials from artists and administrators conceived by Holger Cahill in 1936 to counter charges of “boondoggling” leveled by Congress and the conservative press since the inception of the WPA/FAP in 1935. Although ready for publication in 1939, the anthology remained unpublished until 1973.

naturalism.”²⁸ The distinction between Davis’s approach to realist painting and that practiced by the “domestic naturalists” is crucial; whereas naturalism was premised upon a superficial description and faithful copying of the world, critical realism sought engagement rather than gloss in effort to not only re-present reality, but to expose its complexities and contradictions.²⁹ While this is not to say that all models of naturalistic painting in this period had lost credibility (I am thinking here of *Neue Sachlichkeit*³⁰), the difference is nicely summed up by Williams: “Naturalism was seen as that which merely reproduced the flat external appearance of reality with a certain static quality, whereas realism — in the Marxist tradition, for example — was that method and that intention which went below this surface to the . . . dynamic reality.”³¹

Davis’s insistence on the realism of his practice was not without social and political resonance, especially within a cultural milieu that was increasingly circumscribed by certain priorities and prescriptions for artistic activity, including the demand for an art that did not evade social reality; a pronounced nationalist concern with identifying native traditions; and an increasing interest in the democratisation of culture. The widespread support for realism in this context is not surprising given that from the mid-nineteenth century it was adopted by artists such as Courbet and Millet who believed that painting had a role to play in effecting social reform. Given that realist painting positioned daily life and the activities and aspirations of the masses as the proper subjects of serious art, it was also deemed to be a ‘democratic’ aesthetic, one that suggested a heightened degree of social egalitarianism. Furthermore, in its preoccupation with the ‘here and now’ of contemporary life, realism was also relevant to the cultivating of national identity in that it sought to record common customs and traditions. That all of these associations contributed to the promotion of realism during

²⁸ Davis frequently used this phrase throughout the 1930s; for a representative example see “Abstract Painting Today,” p. 126.

²⁹ Jakobson’s “On Realism in Art” offers a useful clarification of the terminological imprecision around realism; see also Hemingway, “The Realist Aesthetic in Painting,” *Adventures in Realism*, pp. 103-124.

³⁰ See Leslie, “Interrupted Dialogues,” pp. 129-135.

³¹ Williams, “A Lecture on Realism,” p. 65.

the 1930s is not in question; whether Davis's formal repertoire was consonant with these connotations is another matter and will be explored in what follows.

Methodology

This study has both art-historical and historiographical implications and is aligned with the imperatives of a social history of art. What is meant by this, however, also requires something by way of an explanation in that, as David Cottington observes, "the 'social history of art' is a fairly glib label that has been too widely, and too uniformly, applied to a range of approaches whose difference from each other is as substantial as their common emphasis on the historical determinants and character of art works and practices."³² Specifically then, this study will explore modernist muralism within a broader and more adequately historical frame of reference than an immanent critique alone allows. Seeking to effect a productive interaction between formal analysis, empirical historical research, and theoretical reflection, it engages art and politics in relational terms and endeavours to understand artworks as imbricated within a network of reciprocally defining relationships between practices, ideologies, and institutions. Correlations between economics, society and culture are foregrounded so that labour struggles, class conflicts, and political alignments are central to the interpretive matrix for comprehending artistic practice and reception. In brief, this approach is one that, in the words of Hemingway and Paul Jaskot, "does not look at politics through art, but at art through politics."³³

One of the most salient questions to be addressed is *how* artists understood the relationship between their commitment to modernist practices on the one hand, and their political allegiance to the left on the other. In an effort to comprehend the ways in which meanings were constructed in relation to modernist murals, and whether these meanings accorded with those sanctioned by various political and ideological formations such as the New Deal state, the Popular Front, and the Communist Party, formal and iconographic readings of the murals will demonstrate their significance

³² David Cottington, *Cubism and its Histories* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 217.

³³ Hemingway and Paul Jaskot, [Review of T.J. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea* and O.K. Werckmeister's *Icons on the Left*], *Historical Materialism* 7 (Winter 2000), p. 267.

vis-à-vis both modernist artistic practice and the socio-political context in which they were produced. The point is not, however, a matter of reading the ideological imperatives of the New Deal state or the Popular Front into the murals or treating artworks as passive registers of meaning. In contrast to earlier studies of government-sponsored art, where seemingly monolithic and undialectical meanings are ascribed to artworks in a uniform manner, this study will take account of how the production of meaning may have been negotiated by different makers and viewers.

By situating these murals as contested sites for competing exegetical claims it is important to attend to how they were looked at, engaged with, attacked, or defended in order to gain some sense of the artistic, institutional, and political exigencies at play in the cultural matrix circumscribing their production and reception. Correspondingly, this study is largely based on a critical analysis of those sources, both visual and textual, that appeared contemporaneously with the murals. My aim is not limited to historical recovery or period response, although these remain important; rather, I devote a considerable amount of attention to art theory, criticism, and institutional policies and practices (whether on the part of museums, the New Deal state, or the American Community Party) in order to explore the ways in which artworks and meanings emerged as products of a complex series of exchanges and negotiations.

My assumption here is that by exploring modernist muralism within the discursive field in which it was commissioned, executed, and received, something significant is gained, namely what Leja characterizes as “a vivid sense of the paintings as imbricated in social, historical and ideological processes.”³⁴ In acting on this assumption I am aware that this approach to art-historical analysis has come under attack, being parodied in some quarters as an impossible attempt to, in the words of Leja, recuperate “some imaginary ideal fullness to art” — whether in the interest of uncovering what the artist “intended” or establishing an artwork’s “true” meaning for its “original audience.”³⁵ Indeed, the elaboration of historical conditions is in and of

³⁴ Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, pp. 10-11.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

itself an interpretive and ideologically-charged exercise, but it is not without justification or merit, and the meaning or value we accord to artworks is largely dependent upon the framework of relations in which we place them. Crucial to my investigation then are questions regarding how modernists, who were often charged with reaction, silence, or indirection in the face of cultural crisis, were able to enter the field of social and political struggle as defined by the left during the 1930s; moreover, whether modernists were speaking in the voice of a style or a class, or whether they were able to achieve a rapprochement between two cultural registers, one aesthetic, the other political, which were most commonly seen to exist in contention.

‘Cultural Democracy’ and the New Deal State

During the New Deal era calls for a ‘democratization of culture’ became something of a shibboleth for artists and administrators alike, and this too requires some unpacking.³⁶ Translated into the terminology of New Deal ideology, ‘cultural democracy’ meant more than just enriching people’s lives through the creation of beauty, but also cultivating a nation of cultural consumers who would regard artistic production as a source of enjoyment and edification. As Jane de Hart Mathews contends, “If recovery were to be achieved in the arts as well as the economy, government would have to provide potential consumers access to the arts. Only through accessibility would people come to regard the arts, not as an expendable luxury, but as a community asset.”³⁷ Moreover, to assume that the state was a better guarantor than the market for such a culture meant, as Hemingway suggests, that democracy “had to mean more than just consumer choice;” this also meant that “the individual should take on not just the rights but also the responsibilities of citizenship and participation in a democratic society in the fullest sense of the term.”³⁸

This invites a range of further questions that include how art can be accommodated to the requirements of democratic accessibility; what expectations may reasonably be placed upon a mass audience; and, perhaps most significantly, what kind of

³⁶ Hemingway deals with this in his “Cultural Democracy by Default: The Politics of the New Deal Art Programmes,” *OAJ* 30.2 (2007), p. 269.

³⁷ Jane de Hart Mathews addresses this issue in “Art of the People: The New Deal Quest for a Cultural Democracy,” *Journal of American Aesthetics* 62.2 (September 1975), p. 319.

³⁸ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 1.

democracy was being aspired to, not just by the New Deal administration, but by artists working under its auspices. Answers to such questions are inevitably bedeviled, then as now, by a constellation of issues, not least of which were the eclecticism and experimentalism of the New Deal itself. As Alan Brinkley emphasizes, New Deal ideology was never a “uniform or static creed” and the administration “moved in so many directions at once that no one could make sense of it all.”³⁹ Even Alvin Hansen, one of Roosevelt’s principal economic advisers, responded to questions about the soundness of New Deal policy with the reply “I really do not know what the basic principle of the New Deal is.”⁴⁰

It is, however, something of a commonplace that, as Hemingway observes, “despite massive unemployment and vast social dislocations, the situation in Depression America was not a revolutionary one,” as is evinced by specific studies of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) which suggest that, despite their militancy, the perspective of even the most class-conscious sections of the working-class “scarcely achieved the level of the social democratic.”⁴¹ As Williams distils it, social democracy means popular power: “a state in which the interests of the majority of the people were paramount and in which these interests were practically exercised and controlled by the majority.”⁴² So while the New Deal was more responsive to popular pressure, especially that exerted by labour, than had hitherto been the case — as, one might argue, it had to in order to limit social discontent and maintain legitimacy with voters — it never exceeded the limits of bourgeois democracy. That being said, and for all the limitations and gross inequalities that remained intact during the New Deal period, the art projects went a considerable distance in accomplishing a wider enfranchisement of culture, and for artists such as Davis this was a crucial component

³⁹ Alan Brinkley, “The New Deal and the Idea of the State” in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds, *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (New York: Free Press, 1991), pp. 86; 85.

⁴⁰ Alvin Hansen as cited in *ibid.*, p. 85.

⁴¹ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 169; studies of the CIO include Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and Gary Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1916* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁴² Williams, “Democracy,” *Keywords*, p. 96; see also his “Democracy and Parliament” (1982), *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London: Verso, 1989), pp. 256-280.

of social and political change. As Gerald Monroe points out, the dovetailing of the New Deal conviction that art could become a public resource with the notion of “the people” as the ultimate patron enabled both liberals and leftists to convince themselves that they were “forging a new role for the artist in a new society which . . . they were helping to create.”⁴³

For Davis cultural democracy meant more than freedom of expression for artists and accessibility to the masses, although both of these aspects were, of course, essential. As he stated in an article tendentiously entitled “What About Modern Art and Democracy?” the issue of democracy in art boiled down to “who controls it and to what ends,” and this applied not just to purse strings, but to formal issues as well.⁴⁴ In terms of the former, he was a staunch supporter of permanent state funding for the arts and saw the New Deal projects as a “Federal guarantee of the rights of citizens to participate in art just as they are guaranteed the right to an education in reading and writing;” moreover, in combination with federal patronage, the Artists’ Union would ensure that “the artists of America will have direct voice in the management of art production.”⁴⁵ Subscribing to a Marxist view of social democracy, but recognizing that conditions were not yet ripe to achieve this, he believed that the development of a more radical consciousness amongst workers was pivotal to its realization, and here is where his commitment to modern art merges with his radical political perspective. Whereas “domestic naturalism” merely reproduced existing social conditions and thereby affirmed the status quo, modernism was anticipatory and “prophetic of a different world.”⁴⁶ Moreover, modernist forms were capable of cultivating the consciousness of the masses in that they did not merely comprise “a method, a technique, or a style” but instead manifested an “attitude toward reality,” one premised upon re-cognizing social relations and change.⁴⁷

⁴³ Gerald Monroe, “The 30s: Art, Ideology and the WPA,” *Art in America* 63 (November/December 1975), p. 67.

⁴⁴ Davis, “What About Modern Art and Democracy?” *Harper’s* (December 1943), p. 15.

⁴⁵ Davis, “Abstract Painting Today,” p. 122; this quote (which was omitted from the final version, but which O’Connor cites in part) is taken from Davis’s first draft of the essay, which was far more strident in its critique of cultural monopoly as manifested in the museum-dealer-critic system.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

The issue of federal patronage for the arts also poses complex questions about the mechanisms and limits of state control, and since the 1930s there has been a vast body of literature on the New Deal administration. This corpus has been marked by changing interpretive fashions with the central debate being between conservative and radical interpretations of the administration's achievements and ambitions.⁴⁸ However, as Hemingway observes, one of the persistent inadequacies characterizing studies of New Deal art is their failure to work with an interpretive framework that is grounded with any articulate theory of the state.⁴⁹ For example, Richard McKinzie's *The New Deal for Artists* (1973) is essentially a laudatory account of the Roosevelt government's enlightened inclusion of the arts within its social and cultural policy.⁵⁰ In this respect, McKinzie's liberal pluralist approach, which downplays tensions and conflicts between artists, administrators, and the state, is not unlike other standard accounts, such as Belisario Contreras's *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art* (1983). Scholars such as Contreras often fail to recognize the range of institutional constraints under which the projects operated, focusing their exegetical energies on the particular perspective of the director of each of the projects rather than on who controlled the source of funding.⁵¹

However, if liberal interpretations of the federal art projects, such as those of McKinzie and Contreras, tend to overestimate the creative freedom of artists, Jonathan Harris's emphasis on the power of the state exaggerates the restrictive capacity of administrative power. Thus while Harris recognizes the importance of understanding the arts projects as manifestations of state ideology, his interpretation of the relations between the state and muralism is plagued by its own methodological limitations.⁵² As

⁴⁸ See Melvyn Dubofsky, ed., *The New Deal: Conflicting Interpretations and Shifting Perspectives* (London: Garland Publishing, 1992).

⁴⁹ Hemingway, *Artist's on the Left*, p. 79.

⁵⁰ Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973).

⁵¹ In Contreras's *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art* (London: Associated University Press, 1983) "tradition" and "innovation" are the respective outcomes of Edward Bruce's direction of the Treasury Section and Holger Cahill's direction of the Federal Art Project.

⁵² The relevant texts are Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); "State Power and Cultural Discourse: Federal Art Project Murals in New Deal USA," *Block 13* (1987-1988), pp. 28-42; and "Art,

has been pointed out in Hemingway's trenchant critique, Harris's adherence to a corporate liberal framework (fused with concepts culled from Althusser, Poulantzas and Foucault) produces a deterministic account of the relationship between the New Deal and mural painting.⁵³ Indeed, corporate liberal models of the state, which conceive of the New Deal as a conservative reform programme operating in the interest of capital, have now been discredited and are beset by a number of intractable problems; they make a series of government initiatives that were often disorganized and ideologically incoherent — and which were undertaken by a complex network of overlapping state institutions with differing priorities — appear to be the well-orchestrated product of prescient policy-makers.⁵⁴

In many instances the application of a corporate liberal framework to the New Deal fails to offer much in the way of a convincing explanation for either the interventionist measures or the ideological rationales of the first Roosevelt administration, including the federal art projects. While the more progressive thrust of federal policies would be stymied by the late 1930s, the earlier part of the decade was a moment when many cultural workers viewed federal patronage as an opportunity for real empowerment and came to identify in important ways with the ideals of the New Deal. However, Harris's adoption of a corporate liberal model has meant that he views power as only ever resting with the state and his evaluation thus precludes any meaningful interpretive space for human agency, thereby failing to register the complex relations between such agency and state patronage. According to this restrictive view, seemingly all New Deal art must be understood as serving the propagandistic exigencies of the state. The possibility for multi-accentual readings of the works or the

Histories, Politics: The New Deal Art Projects and American Modernism," *Ideas and Production* 5 (Spring 1986), pp. 104-119.

⁵³ Hemingway, "Middlebrow: For and Against," *OAJ* 22.1 (1999), pp. 166-176. Harris's failure to take account of the importance of human agency in the production of meaning is characteristic of much structuralist and poststructuralist thought. For a compelling defense of agency see Alex Callinicos, *Making History: Agency, Structure, and Change in Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987).

⁵⁴ On differing models of the state see William Domhoff, *The Power Elite and the State: How Policy is Made in America* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1990). Carter offers a succinct overview of state theory in relation to the arts programmes in "Structure and Agency in New Deal Art: The Case of William Gropper's *Construction of a Dam*," *Object* 6 (2003-2004), pp. 5-28.

production of meanings beyond those officially sanctioned is denied, as is the prospect of any form of opposition or resistance.

In contradistinction to Harris, Barbara Melosh's *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (1991) offers a more sophisticated analysis of the ways in which the production and reception of artworks was subject to "controversies, debates, misunderstandings and multiple interpretations;" however, as Hemingway observes, for all its insights her study of the Federal Theater Project (1935-1939) and the Treasury Section of Fine Arts (1934-1943) "seems to expect to much from left-wing art in relation to its potential audience" given that while the working class was particularly militant and well-organized during the 1930s, its achievements were reformist rather than revolutionary.⁵⁵ On the other hand Anthony Lee's *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco's Public Murals* (1999) foregrounds the shifting constellation of class forces as the context in which to assess the changing fortunes of leftist muralism during the 1930s.⁵⁶ Unlike Harris, who fails to tackle the ways in which New Deal policies addressed the needs of the disadvantaged more acutely than had hitherto been the case, in addition to how the administration responded to mounting popular pressures, particularly those exerted by the working class, Lee registers the ways in which the state was sometimes receptive to radical pressures and he makes a strong case for understanding New Deal mural production in relation to the struggles of organized labour.⁵⁷ As a result, Lee's account consistently underscores the role of human agency in the negotiation of ideological differences and the production of meaning and

⁵⁵ Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1991), p. 10; Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 169.

⁵⁶ On Lee's text see Carter, "The Public (Mis)use of Art: Radical Artists, Reformist States, and the Politics of Mural Painting in 1930s and 1940s America and Mexico," *OAJ* 23.2 (2000), pp. 165-171.

⁵⁷ For an examination of the relations between labour and the New Deal see Anthony Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940* (New York: Palgrave, 1989), pp. 118-146; Dubofsky, *The State and Labor in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); and David Milton, *The Politics of U.S. Labor: From the Great Depression to the New Deal* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1982). For an analysis of the passage of class legislation during the New Deal which contests state autonomy theories and corporate liberal models to instead emphasize the significance of labour militancy and organization as one among a diversity of social forces see Michael Goldfield, "Worker Insurgency, Radical Organization, and New Deal Labor Legislation," *American Political Science Review* 83.4 (December 1989), pp. 1257-1282.

mobilizes mural painting as a hotly contested site for competing claims on the part of patrons, viewers, and artists. Offering a highly persuasive rationale for revisiting and reassessing New Deal muralism, Lee insists that this was a historical moment “when painting and politics could have a close, explicit relationship; when art — public art, no less — could pursue socially and politically revolutionary ambitions; and when painters could think of themselves as workers whose art could be part of a momentous historical transformation.”⁵⁸ The only reservation I have about this study, and one that I share with Warren Carter, is with respect to Lee’s claims for “Californian exceptionalism” under the PWAP.⁵⁹ Indeed, one of the central aims of my project is to argue against Lee’s assertion that the subsequent WPA years seem to have been “a period of relative homogeneity, in the murals’ iconography and style and in their general ideological tone.”⁶⁰

Organization

This study is organized chronologically and chapter one opens with a consideration of the models on offer for modern artists with a commitment to leftist politics, namely those provided by the Soviet Union and the Mexican Mural Renaissance. Following an evaluation of developments in the Soviet Union and the positioning of modernism on the part of the Communist Party, it addresses the ways in which Mexican muralism — especially as manifested in those commissions executed in New York in the early 1930s — provided examples of an art that was modern, accessible and consonant with a leftist political perspective. Chapter two examines the establishment of the PWAP, the first of the New Deal federal funding initiatives. While no modernist murals were actually executed on this project, it was pivotal in that it set precedents for the FAP, the subject of chapter three. In dealing with these projects I am concerned not only with the artworks produced under their aegis, but also with the ways in which discourses around modernism and the mural developed, especially for those on the left. In chapter four I engage with the theory of realism being elaborated by Davis and Gorky. Seeking to assess whether their contention that modernism was a form of

⁵⁸ Lee, *Painting on the Left*, pp. xvii-xviii.

⁵⁹ Carter, “The Public (Mis)use of Art,” p. 171.

⁶⁰ Lee, *Painting on the Left*, p. 161.

realism consonant with a commitment to leftist politics is more plausible than often assumed, I will not only address their claims in relation to the contemporary American context, but with respect to international dialogues around realism and, in particular, the approaches to realism being promulgated by Brecht and Léger. Chapters five and six return to the FAP and to specific sites where clusters of modernist murals were commissioned. An examination of Gorky's cycle of murals for the Newark Airport in chapter five will be followed in chapter six by a discussion of the commissions for the Williamsburg Housing Project in Brooklyn; in the latter instance particular attention will be paid to the differing approaches to modernist muralism adopted by Davis and Greene. Chapter seven concludes with an analysis of the 1939/1940 New York World's Fair. My interest here is both with the modernist murals executed on this occasion and also with how modernism was being positioned more generally — not only on the part of the Fair's planners, but by the New Deal State, the Party, and by influential institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art, whose *Art in Our Time* exhibition was mounted to accompany the Fair. As I hope to demonstrate, if during the 1930s the possibility existed for a federally-funded art that was technically sophisticated, accessible to a broad public, and compatible with a leftist political perspective, by the end of the decade the Fair and MoMA suggested that the role of both art and the artist was being radically reconfigured.

Chapter One

“We Capture the Walls”:⁶¹ Modernism, Murals, and the American Art Scene

In May 1932, as the Great Depression continued to worsen, the Museum of Modern Art in New York inaugurated its new building on West 53rd Street with an exhibition entitled *Murals by American Painters and Photographers*. One of the murals made in conjunction with the show was *Abstract Vision of New York: a building, a derby hat, a tiger's head, and other symbols* (fig. 1). Painted by Davis, the mural is a brightly-coloured collage of still-life and architectural elements culled from the contemporary urban environment and deployed using striking juxtapositions of scale and multiple angles of vision. This arresting seven-foot vertical panel is significant in that it represents a site where Davis sought to negotiate a rapprochement between a modernist visual vocabulary, then largely associated with an ‘un-American’ aesthetic and bourgeois tastes, with his political commitment to the left. What follows in this chapter is an attempt to come to terms with the artistic and political discourses that circumscribed Davis’s formulation of such a rapprochement. By attending to the various political and artistic models on offer to American modernists, most notably those developed within Soviet and Mexican culture, I will address how leftist artists understood the possibilities and priorities established by these models. In particular, I will examine how and why, in the years leading up to the establishment of the FAP, the mural emerged as the primary vehicle for producing an art that was at once aesthetically modern and politically radical.

In Search of a Revolutionary Modernism

If during the 1920s the groundwork had already been laid for the promotion of an indigenous species of modernism premised upon a return to recognizable subject matter and an interest in the American Scene, then following the stock market collapse in the autumn of 1929 evasions of reality, artistic or otherwise, were deemed to be

⁶¹ This phrase is taken from a statement by Hugo Gellert in the June 1932 issue of *New Masses* entitled “We Capture the Walls!” Gellert is referring to the mural exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art in 1932.

increasingly irresponsible, if not untenable. As massive unemployment, financial chaos, political struggle, and open class warfare erupted in the factories and on the streets, artists were forced to define more precisely their relationship to society, with the need to justify the use of European formal techniques being particularly acute. What, after all, was the function of art and the appropriate role for the artist within a nation whose energies were devoted to matters of immediate practical concern? As became readily apparent, “to bury oneself in one’s art at a time of massive social disintegration seemed a selfish luxury which neither the [artist] nor the country could any longer afford.”⁶² While the merits of community and collectivism were talked about a good deal, with the importance of participating in some larger social cause through the subordination of individual ambition to the needs of the group being a focus of discussion, few were as yet prepared to define any clear-cut goals. It was thus under the enormous pressure to clarify their function in this crisis that many artists began to cast about for a more satisfactory model of their relation to their work, to politics, and to the masses.

For many on the left the Soviet Union was the obvious place to look. During the Third Period (announced at the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern in the Summer of 1928 and continuing until the shift to the People’s Front in 1935) Russian Communism seemed to offer a genuine social and political alternative to capitalist inefficiency and decay. As Richard Pells asserts, the Soviet example “provided not only an alternative to democratic capitalism but a plausible replacement for the dying American Dream.”⁶³ As a result, in the face of a deepening Depression and widespread poverty and unemployment, the Soviet model became increasingly appealing and its propaganda was welcomed enthusiastically and largely uncritically on the left. Unsurprisingly, the pages of Communist publications such as *New Masses* and the *Daily Worker* were brimming with glowing reports that insistently counterpoised the triumphs of the Soviet workers’ state with the decadence and

⁶² Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (1973; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), p. 154.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

exploitation of American corporate capitalism.⁶⁴ According to *New Masses* the “new Soviet citizen” was a “likeable, sociable and an extremely human individual, who is absorbed in building a new world.”⁶⁵ While reading such sanguine descriptions of life under Stalin now fills one with horror, it must be borne in mind that despite the justifiable ease with which commentators retrospectively and entirely correctly condemn the Stalinist model, during the late 1920s and early 1930s the grim realities of the new Soviet regime were not yet so evident. Looking back at American assessments of the Soviet state, the response on the part of liberals is perhaps more significant in many ways than that of American Communists. While one would anticipate choruses of praise from Communists, liberal publications such as *The Nation* and *The New Republic* were also enthusiastic about the Russian “experiment.” The new Soviet state was testing the most cherished economic and political assumptions of American democratic capitalism and liberals were, as George Soule’s comments in *The New Republic* make clear, eager to see what the outcome would be:

If [the Soviet state] goes on in the course of time to produce at least as high a standard of living as ours without our insecurity, to demonstrate the possibility of planning and control over a complex industrial system and to offer a full measure of the more intangible satisfactions, the effect will be as momentous in history as was the discovery [sic] of America at the end of the Middle Ages. Not only shall we know that capitalism as we have experienced it is undesirable, but that a different and better order is actually possible.⁶⁶

Even John Dewey, a liberal who was otherwise quite vocal regarding his skepticism towards Marxism, offered a glowing account of the “progress” of Communism following his trip to Moscow in 1928.⁶⁷

If liberals and Communists alike were preoccupied with social and political developments in the USSR, Soviet cultural programmes also provided a crucial

⁶⁴ Virginia Marquardt provides a discussion of *New Masses* from an art-historical standpoint in “*New Masses* and JRC Artists, 1926-1936: Evolution of Ideology, Subject Matter, and Style,” *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 12 (Spring 1989), pp. 56-75.

⁶⁵ Maxwell Stewart, “Meet the Soviet Citizen,” *NM* 16 (2 July 1935), p. 41.

⁶⁶ George Soule, “Hard-Boiled Radicalism,” *TNR* (21 January 1931), p. 261.

⁶⁷ See Dewey’s six-part series of essays “Impressions of Soviet Russia” published in *The New Republic* between 14 November and 19 December 1928.

example for New York leftists. This was especially true for Communist and fellow-travelling artists, as the policies of the American Community Party (CPUSA) were very much dependent upon decisions issuing from Moscow. The Soviet example, however, was rarely straightforward. American artists and cultural commentators often interpreted Soviet models in a simplified, un-nuanced manner against a backdrop of misinformation and misconception, seldom fully understanding the socio-political implications of such developments. Even Barr, who travelled to the Soviet Union in 1927 just prior to the founding of MoMA, was dismayed by what he found there, namely a situation of seemingly unmanageable conflict. Having set out to explore current avant-garde production by artists working in the new post-revolutionary society, he was confronted with what he described as “an appalling variety of things.”⁶⁸

The presence of conflicting elements and competing tendencies within Soviet artistic culture meant that its lessons proved difficult to interpret and, for American leftists seeking a lead to follow, the way forward was far from clear. Even in the aftermath of the landmark April Decree “On the Reconstruction of Literary and Radical Organizations” (issued in 1932 and calling for the dissolution of competing artistic groups into one central artists’s union), debate did not cease. As Brandon Taylor asserts, the Decree did not, in contradistinction to standard art-historical accounts, resolve itself in the adoption of a single aesthetic philosophy or halt discussions of artistic policy; in fact, the idea of Socialist Realism was not yet promulgated in 1932 and, if anything, artistic debate increased.⁶⁹ It was not until the Soviet Writers’ Congress in 1934 that Socialist Realism as an aesthetic doctrine became institutionalized.

Given that the Soviets themselves did not yet offer a single authoritative aesthetic model in the early 1930s, it is not surprising that wide differences of opinion marked the positions assumed by American Communists and fellow-travellers on cultural

⁶⁸ Barr, “Russian Diary 1927-1928,” *October* 7 (Winter 1978), p. 21.

⁶⁹ Brandon Taylor, *Art and Literature Under the Bolsheviks*, vol. 2 (London: Pluto Press, 1992), p. 183.

matters. As the CPUSA's General Secretary Earl Browder stated as late as 1935, "there is no 'Party line' by which works of art can automatically be separated into sheeps and goats."⁷⁰ Yet, as Hemingway has pointed out, despite the Party's inability to offer anything in the way of substantive guidance regarding artistic practice, "given the totalizing nature of Communism as a belief system, a kind of aesthetic discourse had perforce to be articulated within the Communist press."⁷¹ That being said, Soviet developments in art were not followed as closely as those in literature, and art reviews in general were not a regular feature of *New Masses* until the latter half of 1934. Moreover, those texts that did appear were generally authored by the artists themselves and were limited to discussions of the activities of the John Reed Club (JRC), an organization that developed out of the *New Masses* group in 1929 and which served as the primary institutional base for Communist and fellow-travelling artists until 1935. While left-wing intellectuals such as Meyer Schapiro contributed occasional reviews it was not until late 1934 that a column authored by JRC artist Steven Alexander provided anything approaching a sustained treatment of the visual arts. In fact, as Hemingway has demonstrated, in the late 1920s and early 1930s readers could learn more about Soviet artistic developments in the mainstream art press than in specifically leftist publications.⁷²

While concrete guidance for artists on the left was limited, examples of Soviet art and discussions of cultural policy were available. The main accounts, both of which were illustrated, were Louis Lozowick's *Modern Russian Art* (1925) and *Voices of October: Art and Literature in Soviet Russia* (1930), which he co-authored with Joseph Freeman and Joshua Kunitz. Lozowick, a founding editor of *New Masses* and International Secretary to the JRC, was an artist who had become familiar with contemporary Soviet culture as a result of his travels to Berlin, Paris and Moscow during the early 1920s. *Modern Russian Art*, published by the Société Anonyme in New York, details the emergence of modernism from the early Cézannist "Jack of Diamonds" group, through Rayonnism, Primitivism, Cubism, Suprematism and Constructivism. *Voices of*

⁷⁰ Earl Browder, *Communism in the United States* (New York: International Publishers, 1935), p. 313.

⁷¹ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 8.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

October, published by the Vanguard Press, offered a chronicle of developments through the New Economic Policy (introduced in 1921). While the authors were well aware that during an era of such complex social and political upheavals information on Soviet cultural developments was provisional and quickly rendered obsolete, both texts noted that by the early 1920s modernism was in decline.⁷³

Additionally, there were three exhibitions of Soviet art that afforded an opportunity to see contemporary Russian work first-hand. The first two shows, mounted at Grand Central Palace in 1924 and 1929 respectively, were held under the auspices of Amtorg, a Soviet trading corporation. Comprised of some 278 paintings, sculptures, and graphic works, the 1929 exhibition prompted only a brief notice in *New Masses*.⁷⁴ The third show, *The Art of Soviet Russia*, was jointly organized by the College Art Association (CAA), the Pennsylvania Museum of Art, and the American Russian Institute for Cultural Relations and travelled from 1934 to 1936.⁷⁵ The exhibition included 60 paintings and 163 graphic works, and was accompanied by a text entitled *Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Art in the USSR*. Published by the Soviet Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, it served as an “almanac” of the development of Soviet art since the October Revolution. While remarking that American audiences badly needed more extensive and detailed presentations of artistic developments in the USSR, *New Masses* art critic Stephen Alexander suggested that American artists should be particularly interested in the chapter on “Soviet Pictorial Art.” According to Alexander, at a moment when American artists were struggling to grapple with issues such as the recurrent “Abstract vs. Representational Art” controversy, it was especially significant “to see how these problems were effectively solved in the workers’ republic where the realism of socialist growth leaves no room

⁷³ On the revitalization of realism in the Soviet Union see Taylor, “Socialist Realism,” *Adventures in Realism*, pp. 142-157; and Sheila Fitzpatrick *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 216-237.

⁷⁴ “Soviet Art in New York,” *NM* 4.9 (February 1929), p. 5.

⁷⁵ As Hemingway points out, *Fortune* magazine published a well-illustrated review of the exhibition that was surprisingly sympathetic in that it characterized the April Decree as a liberalization of Soviet culture. This review is also of interest in that it draws compelling, if surprising, parallels between Aleksandr Deineka and Thomas Hart Benton. See “State Art,” *Fortune* 11.3 (March 1935), pp. 62-67; and Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, note 16, p. 289.

for abstractions.”⁷⁶ This mutual exclusivity of “social art” and “abstraction” demonstrated by the Soviet model was further underscored a few months later by cartoonist and printmaker Russell Limbach, who opened a book review of Studio Publication’s *Art in the USSR* (1935) with the comment that “When an artist awakens to the social turmoil outside his studio windows he kicks his still lifes, his nudes, his abstractions, his landscapes all under the bed [and] embraces the revolutionary movement.”⁷⁷

Taken together, the exhibitions of Soviet art in New York were not sympathetic toward a modernist visual vocabulary. While the show in 1929 was more comprehensive in terms of competing artistic practices and included works by Tatlin and El Lissitzky, the catalogue underscored the importance of the re-emergence of the realist tradition in Soviet art, with a foreword written by Christian Brinton lambasting “the blighting abstractions of Cubism.”⁷⁸ By the mid-1930s, any connections between contemporary Soviet art and modernism were effectively severed for American audiences. The third exhibition did not include a single modernist work, and the accompanying catalogue essay, again authored by Brinton, unequivocally declared that “modernism as such was a dead issue in the USSR” by 1924.⁷⁹ While Brinton’s statement is something of an oversimplification, in the wake of the Soviet adoption of Socialist Realism as the official aesthetic philosophy in 1934 a major campaign was indeed launched against modernism in all artistic spheres, with attacks on the architect Konstantin Melnikov and the composer Dimitri Shostakovich being particularly emblematic.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Stephen Alexander, “Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Art in the USSR,” *NM* 14 (26 March 1935), p. 29.

⁷⁷ Russell Limbach, “Soviet Art,” *NM* 17 (26 November 1935), p. 25.

⁷⁸ *Exhibition of Contemporary Art of Soviet Russia: Paintings, Graphics, Sculpture*, Grand Central Palace, New York, February 1929, text by Christian Brinton and P. Novitsky, n. p. (a copy of the catalogue is in the Avery Library at Columbia University, New York).

⁷⁹ *The Art of Soviet Russia*, American Russian Institute, 1936, text by Brinton and Fiske Kimball, n. p.

⁸⁰ Fierce anti-modernist criticism led to Melnikov’s dismissal from his teaching post at the Moscow School. Such criticism increased in 1937 during the First Congress of Soviet Architects, which affirmed the conservative principles of Socialist Realism as the official ‘method’ of Soviet architecture, and in 1938 his right to practice professionally was removed. Similarly, Shostakovich was bitterly attacked for the modernist style of his music, kicking off with an attack on his new opera *Lady Macbeth of the*

Both Lozowick and art critic Clara Mason responded to the discrediting of modernism in the Soviet Union, and were keen to assure American readers that while tendencies toward abstraction “had to be curbed by what the Soviets call ‘natural means,’” the artist’s right to individual freedom of expression had not been breached.⁸¹ As Mason explained in the pages of *Parnassus* following her trip to Moscow in the summer of 1933 to study the *Exhibition of Fifteen Years of Soviet Art* (a massive show including some 3,000 works by more than 350 artists), “the desire was not to interfere with individual interpretation and style, but to unite art with the revolutionary ideas in such a way as to set them forth and interpret them clearly to a people.”⁸² In fact, the exhibition had clearly demonstrated that there had been “no favoritism and no forcing of approach” through the presence of a few modernist works in the show. However, while a small gallery was devoted to modern works, their consummate inappropriateness was driven home through the writing of Lenin’s words over the doorway to the gallery: “I am unable to consider the works of expressionism, futurism, Cubism and of the other ‘isms’ as the supreme manifestations of human genius. I do not understand them. They give me no sense of joy.” For Mason, it was thus “obvious” to the Soviets that such “extremists” simply “had no place in the present scheme of proletarian culture.”⁸³

While it is important to emphasize that Socialist Realism did not simply jettison modernism overnight, nor was such a shift merely enforced from above, as much Cold War art-historical scholarship would have us believe, the modernist avant-garde of the 1920s did give way under state pressure.⁸⁴ Moreover, whether or not such cultural conditions actually existed whereby, as Lozowick optimistically claimed, the wide mass of Soviet artists were able to enjoy their “new social status” and “economic security” in the production of an art that was documentary in form and socialist in

Mtsensk District in 1936. For a discussion of the Shostakovich affair see Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front*, pp. 183-215.

⁸¹ Lozowick, “Aspects of Soviet Art,” *NM* 14 (29 January 1935), p. 16; Clara Mason, “Pictures and Peasants,” *Parnassus* 5.7 (December 1933), p. 24.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Christina Kiaer, “Was Socialist Realism Forced Labour? The Case of Aleksandr Deineka in the 1930s,” *OAJ* 28.3 (2005), pp. 321-345.

content, the Soviet model had little to offer American modernists during the 1930s.⁸⁵ As Limbach commented in *New Masses*, while American artists grappling with the issue of what “form” the new social subject matter should take inevitably asked “What are the boys in Russia doing about it?,” Limbach compared contemporary Russian painting to “the illustrative style familiar to readers of the Saturday Evening Post” and concluded that the “American artist has nothing to learn from his comrades in the USSR.”⁸⁶

Developments in the Soviet Union posed additional problems for American artists, especially given that cultural conditions in New York were vastly different from those in Moscow. Not least among the issues faced by American artists was the CPUSA’s fear of alienating potential allies. In artistic terms this anxiety manifested itself in the perceived need to effect a compromise between a proletarian aesthetic and one that would also appeal to progressive audiences outside the confines of Party circles. In an effort to address these issues, one of the mandates of the JRC was “to clarify and crystallize our own theories of art and their relation to the revolutionary labor movement” in the hopes of establishing, if not imposing, some form of common direction.⁸⁷ But this proved particularly difficult given that, as Hemingway observes, the CPUSA had no aesthetic theorists of its own to tackle such issues.⁸⁸ The situation was almost certainly exacerbated by the shift that *New Masses* underwent in 1934 from being a primarily cultural organ to a more overtly political publication.

In the early years of the Depression then American leftists were, for the most part, left to sort out for themselves what constituted a socialist aesthetic. However, while the Soviet model was unequivocal in its rejection of modernism by mid-decade, I want to argue that this lack of any clear or unified position on the part of the CPUSA actually left a discursive space open in which modernists could engineer their own formulation of a socially and politically committed art. Although by no means writing in support of

⁸⁵ Lozowick, “Aspects of Soviet Art,” p. 19.

⁸⁶ Limbach, “Soviet Art,” p. 25.

⁸⁷ “Constitution of the John Reed Club” cited in Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 20.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

modernism, or making the claim (as Davis would) that modernist form conceived correctly possessed radical import in and of itself, Alexander recognized that, at least in theory, a rapprochement could be achieved between modernism and radical content: "Today the issues are along a much broader front. The ideological content, the subject, the social implications, the emotional impact . . . all these are for us important factors, *along with 'formal' or technical considerations*" [italics mine].⁸⁹ A year later, Thomas Willison's comments in *New Masses* further seemed to suggest that, while official Soviet rhetoric denied any role for modernist formal devices, there might still be some room to manoeuvre: "The revolutionary artist does not find at hand an already digested material repertoire of traditional compositions or important subjects . . . from which he can proceed. . . . There are no formulas or prescribed rules of revolutionary painting."⁹⁰

The Mexican Mural Renaissance

If the Soviets failed to offer a model of revolutionary art that was able to accommodate both a social role for the artist and modernist practices, another example of revolutionary art was gaining visibility in New York during this period that would come to be seen as exemplary by many on the left; this was the art of the Mexican Mural Renaissance.⁹¹ While leftists may have been looking to the Bolshevik state as their political model, they were not much impressed with the Soviet artistic example; by contrast, the art of the Mexican muralists was pivotal to the formation of a modern public art in America.⁹² As one leftist critic asserted in 1934, *los tres grandes* were "a more creative influence in American painting than the modernist French masters."⁹³ Demonstrating that a politically engaged artistic practice could function as an 'art for the people,' José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros viewed

⁸⁹ Alexander, "Revolutionary Front — 1934," *NM* 13.9 (November 1934), p. 28.

⁹⁰ Thomas Willison, "Revolutionary Art Today," *NM* 17 (1 October 1935), p. 17.

⁹¹ In order to fully grasp the importance of Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco, it is necessary to stress that their influence was both a reflection of and contribution to the more general attraction of Mexico itself to American intellectuals at this juncture. See James Oles, *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination, 1914-1947* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1993).

⁹² On the changing attitudes of American Communists toward the Mexican muralists see Hemingway, "American Communists View Mexican Muralism: Critical and Artistic Responses," *Cronicas: El Muralismo, producto de la revolución mexicana en América* (March 2001/March 2002), pp. 13-43.

⁹³ Charmion von Wiegand, "Mural Painting in America," *Yale Review* 23.4 (June 1934), p. 791.

the mural as a locus where revolutionary social aspirations could be expressed in the language of artistic modernism. As a result, the murals executed by these artists, both those in Mexico and, importantly, those painted in the US, set a precedent for a radical public art that illustrated what could be achieved when artists worked under the aegis of the state.⁹⁴

Muralism underwent a significant transformation in the US during the early years of the Depression. Partially as a result of the construction boom in the 1920s, which resulted in the erection of new commercial buildings across the country, the mural once again became a focus of discussion.⁹⁵ Liberal critics such as Goodrich were, however, no longer content to view the mural as mere “decoration” or as a “glorified architectural ornament” and were seeking instead a more modern approach to muralism.⁹⁶ His lament that the mural was no more than “a discreet and self-effacing handmaid of architecture” was based on the fact that its form and content were frequently determined by the exigencies of placing the work in a pre-given setting. As a result, despite the mural’s heroic past as the very acme of Western painting, it was now castigated for lacking the autonomy of the easel picture and was often denigrated as “decorative,” a category which, as Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger put it in *Du Cubisme* (1912), was the very “antithesis of the picture.”⁹⁷ The conflating of the mural

⁹⁴ See Laurance P. Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989). The reasons why the government would support muralism as a form of mass cultural production has much to do with how the rhetoric and reception of such murals is interpreted, particularly with respect to the concept of artistic agency and its complex relation to state patronage in Mexico — an issue that goes beyond the scope of my analysis. As is well-known, the Mexican Revolution was deeply compromised in many ways and I do not mean to suggest that the Mexican state offered an ideal model of a leftist government. On Mexican muralism see Leonard Folgarait, *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940: Art of the New Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); however, the conclusions Folgarait draws with respect to the relations between the state and mural painting have been the subject of an incisive methodological critique; see Carter, “The Public (Mis)use of Art,” pp. 165-171.

⁹⁵ From the late 1870s until the First World War mural paintings were conceived as the necessary “decorative adjuncts” to new private, civic, state and federal buildings and they were executed in well over four hundred buildings throughout the US. See *The American Renaissance, 1876-1917* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 1976), pp. 178-189.

⁹⁶ Goodrich, “Mural Paintings by Boardman Robinson,” *The Arts* 16.6 (February 1930), pp. 390-391. On Robinson see Albert Christ-Janer, *Boardman Robinson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946).

⁹⁷ Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, “Cubism” (1912) in Robert Herbert, ed., *Modern Artists on Art* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 5.

with the decorative has perhaps been more significant for the diminished status of 1930s public art than has yet been acknowledged; indeed, this marginalizing of the decorative within the history of modernism has proven somewhat intractable, as was evident when, decades later, Clement Greenberg maintained that “Decoration is the spectre that haunts modernist painting.”⁹⁸ As Wollen observes, the familiar antinomy between the “pictorial” and the “decorative” is but one of the “cascade of oppositions” that has (mis)informed the modernist narrative.⁹⁹ While such categorical oppositions have now been rethought, the term was frequently used pejoratively during the 1920s and 1930s, especially, as Roger Benjamin suggests, to those artists who rejected the overarchingly bourgeois ideology of the decorative “as a social restorative” or “therapeutic reward.”¹⁰⁰

What commentators such as Goodrich were thus calling for were “vigorous and living” murals that would supersede the “frigid pomposities of the average academic decorator.”¹⁰¹ Writing for *The Arts* in 1930 he was particularly pleased with a series of mural panels exhibited at the Art Students’ League in New York. Painted by Boardman Robinson, a leftist who served as an artistic editor and regular cartoonist for *New Masses*, the theme of the murals is the history of commerce and the ten panels (only nine of which were completed at the time of the exhibition) were destined for the Kaufmann Department Store in Pittsburgh (fig. 2). Goodrich deplored the “stilted stylization” characterizing murals such as those executed at the end of the nineteenth century for the Boston Public Library by John Singer Sargent (fig. 3), Edwin Austin Abbey (fig. 4), and Puvis de Chavannes (fig. 5) or those painted by Kenyon Cox and Edwin Blashfield for the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. (1895-1896)

⁹⁸ Clement Greenberg, “Milton Avery” (1957) in John O’Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 43; see also Donald Kuspit, *Clement Greenberg: Art Critic* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1979.)

⁹⁹ Wollen, *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture* (London: Verso: 1993), p. 16.

¹⁰⁰ Roger Benjamin, “The Decorative Landscape, Fauvism, and the Arabesque of Observation,” *Art Bulletin* 75.2 (June 1993), p. 299. For a rethinking of the opposition between the “pictorial” and the “decorative” see, in addition to Wollen, David Cottington, *Cubism in the Shadow of War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 169-195 and Nancy J. Troy, *Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991).

¹⁰¹ Goodrich, “Mural Paintings by Boardman Robinson,” pp. 390-391.

(fig. 6).¹⁰² Calling for a new approach to public art, he was encouraged that an artist of “liberal tendencies” like Robinson was chosen for such an ambitious undertaking as the Kaufmann Store.¹⁰³

Similarly advocating a more contemporary approach to muralism, Charmion von Wiegand’s historical overview of “Mural Painting in America” (1934) bemoaned the fact that “in spite of the advent of modernism in the last decade, mural decoration has for the most part been shackled to the academic.”¹⁰⁴ Von Wiegand, a committed leftist and enthusiastic advocate of Communism in the early 1930s who had lived in Moscow from 1929 to 1932, was an art critic for *New Masses* and a feature writer and editor at *Art Front*. She was also a champion of public art, in particular the murals of Siqueiros, and a well-informed modernist, later supporting Expressionism before becoming an abstract painter under the sway of Mondrian.¹⁰⁵ Equally unimpressed with the approach to muralism adopted by Puvis, Sargent or Cox, she felt that “their vast lady Justices and Liberties in classical garment” constituted a particularly “lugubrious chapter” in the history of American art; while there were “yards of murals strung out all the way from the Atlantic seaboard to the Pacific coast in state capitols, libraries, and institutions,” it was high time to bring mural painting “back to its vital function in society.”¹⁰⁶

No longer assumed to be an artform that served a purely “decorative” purpose, the mural was eagerly embraced by leftists as a vehicle for the transmission of radical images and ideas. Moreover, in contrast to Soviet developments in art, the Mexican

¹⁰² See *The American Renaissance*, pp. 178-189.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

¹⁰⁴ Von Wiegand, “Mural Painting,” p. 796.

¹⁰⁵ Interestingly, von Wiegand was the daughter of an eminent Hearst journalist and her unequivocal praise for the results of the Revolution were published in a Hearst newspaper. See “Soviets Creating a New, Vivid Style of Art,” *The New York American* 25 December 1932; “Europe’s ‘Last Frontier’ Becoming Economic Center of Soviet Russia,” 25 September 1932; “Science is Making Great Strides in Russia,” 13 November 1932; “Russia Takes the Lead in Arctic Exploration,” 12 March 1933. Susan Noyes Platt devotes a chapter to von Wiegand in *Art and Politics in the 1930s. Modernism, Marxism, Americanism: A History of Cultural Activism During the Depression Years* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1999), pp. 109-121. See also Larsen, “Charmion von Wiegand: Walking on a Road with Milestones,” *Arts Magazine* 60.3 (November 1985), pp. 29-31 and Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, pp. 105-112.

¹⁰⁶ Von Wiegand, “Mural Painting,” pp. 796; 799.

Mural Renaissance was widely discussed in the American press. Following an early article on Mexican culture published in *The Nation* in 1924 and authored by Bertram Wolfe (then a member of the CPUSA who also played an important role in the Mexican Communist Party in the mid-1920s), the mural movement received extensive coverage in *The Arts*, *Creative Art*, and *New Masses*.¹⁰⁷ As leftist critics and ideologues were quick to note, the Mexican muralists, with their unequivocal affirmation of a public art of social commitment, directly addressed many of the central concerns of American artists during the early years of the Depression.

In particular it was as an art underpinned by notions of community that muralism offered a compelling alternative to the mounting isolation and alienation experienced by artists working within the capitalist system. The first report in *New Masses* on the work being done in Mexico came from John Dos Passos upon his return from Mexico in 1927. While not a Party member, he was a fellow-traveller at this point and was among the roster of prominent writers who were associated with the journal when it was launched the preceding year. Contrasting the “private sensations and experiments framed and exhibited” in New York galleries with an art form that served as “a challenge shouted in the face of the rest of the world,” he celebrated the Mexican artists’s desire to “Paint to the Revolution!”¹⁰⁸ In contradistinction to the bourgeois art market, which served up “warmed-over truck” and “stuff a man’s afraid to be seen looking at,” they demonstrated that the mural offered an alternative to the trade in easel paintings as “aristocratic and onanistic” goods.¹⁰⁹ This emphasis on the mural as a public art for the collectivity, one that rejected the individualism characterizing bourgeois experience, was later underscored by Orozco in his manifesto-like text published in *Creative Art* in January 1929:

¹⁰⁷ Bertram Wolfe, “Art and Revolution in Mexico,” *The Nation* (27 August 1924), pp. 207-208. Wolfe’s text was preceded by José Juan Tablada, “Diego Rivera — A Mexican Painter,” *The Arts* 4.4 (October 1923), pp. 221-233 and was followed by a much longer article by Anita Brenner, “A Mexican Renaissance,” *The Arts* 8.3 (September 1925), pp. 127-150. See also the special “Mexican Art” issue of *CA* 4.1 (January 1929).

¹⁰⁸ John Dos Passos, “Paint the Revolution!” *NM* 2.5 (March 1927), p. 15.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

The highest, the most logical, the purest and strongest form of painting is the mural. In this form alone it is one with the other arts – with all the others. It is, too, the most disinterested form, for it cannot be made a matter of private gain; it cannot be hidden away for the benefit of a certain privileged few. It is for the people. It is for *ALL*.¹¹⁰

For New York leftists eager to define a revolutionary popular art aligned with Soviet cultural ideology, the public nature and accessibility of the mural seemed to accord well with contemporary claims that, for the Soviets, “a work of art is created for life, and not for a museum.”¹¹¹ In fact, as early as 1928 Hugo Gellert executed a mural for the cafeteria of the Workers’ Cooperative in Union Square that included images of black workers, miners, Lenin, and Sacco and Vanzetti. An announcement of the project in *New Masses* heralded the mural as “the first large-scale demonstration in this country of that union of art and labor which is the keynote of Soviet Russia.”¹¹² Moreover, for those leftists casting about for a model of radical art that was both public and *modern*, the Mexican muralists seemed to have achieved just such a rapprochement.

The powerful influence of the Mexican model for New York leftists was partly a result of its sheer accessibility and proximity. Not only did a number of artists travel to Mexico during the 1920s and 1930s but, unlike Soviet cultural developments, the lessons of the Mexican experience could be gleaned with particular ease and directness.¹¹³ For example, two major exhibitions of Mexican art in New York bracketed the decade and attest to the unprecedented interest it held for US audiences during this period: the 1,200 piece travelling *Mexican Art* show that opened in 1930 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (in which Orozco exhibited several canvases, including five oils depicting events from the Mexican Revolution) and the 5,000-piece exhibition *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*, mounted at the Museum of Modern Art

¹¹⁰ José Clemente Orozco, “New World, New Races, New Art,” *CA* 4.1 (January 1929), p. xlvii.

¹¹¹ Theodor Schmit, “Roads to Art in the USSR,” *Parnassus* 2.8 (December 1930), p. 8.

¹¹² *New Masses* (January 1929), p. 4.

¹¹³ On American artists working in Mexico see Oles, “Walls to Paint On: American Muralists in Mexico, 1933-1936,” PhD thesis, Yale University, 1995.

in 1940.¹¹⁴ Yet while such shows brought American artists into direct contact with Mexican artistic developments, it was the arrival of the three main muralists in the US, and the controversies generated by their work, that enabled the Mexican example to serve as such a powerful cultural catalyst. This example was, however, far from uniform or straightforward; as Hemingway observes, while discussions of Mexican influences on American art typically lump Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros together, sweeping aside the individual character of their works, each artist offered American leftists a distinct set of aesthetic and political possibilities, and responses to their murals were complicated by manifest differences between them.¹¹⁵

Rivera was the most visible of the Mexican muralists. Following his sojourn in California in late 1930 and the completion of three murals in San Francisco, he travelled to New York in mid-November 1931 for his landmark retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art.¹¹⁶ Arriving with an international reputation as the most accomplished of the Mexican muralists, the exhibition was a popular success. Interest in Rivera on the part of New Yorkers was clearly evinced by the fact that the show broke all of MoMA's previous attendance records, bringing in more than 56,000 visitors. In addition to easel paintings, watercolours, drawings, and mural studies, five portable fresco panels pictured Mexican subjects derived from his murals at the Secretary of Public Education and the Palace of Cortés, presenting historical narratives

¹¹⁴ Orozco's works for the Metropolitan exhibition were painted while he was in San Francisco and included the large *Zapata* (4 x 5 feet); four oils depicting subjects from the Mexican Revolution; two oils entitled *Échate la otra* and *Mannequins*; two studies for the National Preparatory School murals executed in Mexico City; and two drawings from the *Mexico in Revolution* series. Mere cultural appreciation did not account for the allure of Mexico during the decade, or for the mounting of such mammoth exhibitions. Such initiatives must be understood in terms of a more widespread process of overdetermination where the establishment of good cultural relations was tied to political and financial interests in Latin America, as demonstrated by the activities of the Rockefellers and Dwight Morrow, American Ambassador in Mexico from 1927 to 1930. On the Rockefellers in Latin America see Peter Collier and David Horowitz, *The Rockefellers: An American Dynasty* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1976), pp. 202-211. On Morrow see Harold Nicholson, *Dwight Morrow* (London: Constable & Co., 1935). For an overview see Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists*, p. 9.

¹¹⁵ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 27.

¹¹⁶ The exhibition was on view from 2 December 1931 to 27 January 1932 and was comprised of fifty-six easel paintings; eighty-nine watercolours, drawings, and mural studies; and eight fresco panels (6 x 8 feet each) executed expressly for the show. On the influence of Rivera and the Mexican mural movement on the West Coast see Lee, *Painting on the Left*.

of conquest, oppression, and revolution.¹¹⁷ The remaining three panels were based on Rivera's observations of contemporary metropolitan life in New York, including *Frozen Assets* (fig. 7), whose three horizontal bands suggest the stratification of the classes and depict (from top to bottom) a bank vault being loaded with money and jewels, a makeshift shelter peopled with the homeless and unemployed, and the buildings of the Manhattan skyline looming overhead like mausoleums.

Rivera was not just a technically-gifted artist, he was also a savvy master of public relations, being the only muralist to maintain government patronage during the rapid turnover of regimes in Mexico. Moreover, he could also be seen as an important (and willing) participant in the construction and maintenance of cross-border cultural relations between the US and her southern neighbour, with his retrospective at MoMA, one of only two solo shows mounted by the museum to date (the other dedicated to Matisse earlier that year), serving as an instance of attempts to "promote friendship" between the two nations.¹¹⁸ While the left had initially embraced Rivera on the basis of "his former record as a revolutionary artist," the tide turned while his show was still on view. Leftist detractors cited his exploitation of "the influence he obtained as a Communist and working class leader to play the game of Wall Street and its Fascist Government in Mexico."¹¹⁹ As a result, following his participation in a public meeting arranged by the JRC in January 1932 (the outcome of which was not to the members's satisfaction), an announcement published in *New Masses* vehemently castigated him for his "unprincipled activities as a supporter of American imperialism," informing readers that Rivera's \$100 contribution to the Club had been

¹¹⁷ These five panels were *The Conquest*; *Sugar Cane*; *The Agrarian Leader Zapata*; *Liberation of the Peon*; and *Uprising*.

¹¹⁸ For example, not only had Ambassador Morrow commissioned Rivera to execute frescoes in the Palace of Cortés at Cuernavaca, but the exhibition at MoMA was organized by the Mexican Arts Association, Inc., established in 1929 to "promote friendship between the people of Mexico and the US by encouraging cultural relationships and the interchange of Fine and Applied arts." The Association was sponsored by Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and included members of the Morrow and Rockefeller families; see Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* (New York: Stein and Day, 1963), p. 297. In addition, the Rockefeller family would also commission Rivera's frescoes for Rockefeller Center and underwrite Orozco's salary and expenses at Dartmouth.

¹¹⁹ John Reed Club, "Diego Rivera and the John Reed Cclub," *NM* 7 (February 1932), p. 31.

returned!¹²⁰ The same issue of the journal included a longer and more comprehensive appraisal of the problematic relations between “Painting and Politics” in Rivera’s practice. Written by ‘Robert Evans,’ the article kicked off with a fairly balanced detailing of the strengths and weaknesses of Rivera’s work as revealed by the MoMA exhibition.¹²¹ However, Evans lamented the fact that, in his current phase of practice, Rivera had “abandoned the revolutionary movement and turned to painting for the bourgeoisie,” causing his work to go into decline.¹²² The article also detailed the artist’s role in the increasing corruption characterizing cultural and political relations between the US and Mexico, concluding with an observation that was as personal as it was political: “[Rivera] must realize that cut off from the revolutionary workers and peasants, he faces corruption as a man and bankruptcy as an artist.”¹²³

A few months after the JRC debacle, Rivera arrived in Detroit and secured a contract with the Arts Commission (headed up by Edsel Ford and William Valentier, the director of the Detroit Institute of Arts) to paint the walls of the Institute’s Garden Court. Funded by Ford, the twenty-seven panel *Detroit Industry* mural cycle presents a vision of the workers and the industries of Detroit centred around Ford’s River Rouge operation (figs 8 and 9).¹²⁴ Although Rivera commenced the commission in July 1932 as the American economy spiraled further into depression (with the auto industry suffering particularly huge losses and staggering rates of unemployment), the murals are not a contemporary depiction of the worker’s reality: they do not illustrate the brutal labour conditions in the factories, the Communist-led unemployment marches (such as the protest in March 1932 which was violently repressed by police leaving

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Robert Evans, “Painting and Politics,” *NM* 7 (February 1932), pp. 22-25. As Hemingway notes, while the article was signed “Robert Evans,” it was actually written by Joseph Freeman, who was *Tass* correspondent in Mexico in 1929 and whose first wife, Ione Robinson, worked as an assistant on the murals for the National Palace (and had been one of Rivera’s lovers); Freeman’s second wife was von Wiegand. See Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 27.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹²⁴ For an overview of the murals see Alicia Azuela, *Diego Rivera en Detroit* (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1990). The best interpretive texts on the murals are Max Kozloff, “The Rivera Frescoes of Modern Industry at the Detroit Institute of Arts: Proletarian Art Under Capitalist Patronage,” *Artforum* 12 (November 1973), pp. 58-63; and Terry Smith, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 199-246.

four workers dead, while the wounded were arrested and chained to their hospital beds), or the fact that Henry Ford fired any employee suspected of belonging to a union, thereby staunchly defying the National Recovery Administration's right-to-organize stipulation.¹²⁵

Within the broader context of their reception, the murals were unveiled in March 1933 to a largely supportive audience, albeit generating a heated, but brief, controversy in the press.¹²⁶ Such controversy, and the articles the murals generated in publications such as *The American Magazine of Art*, *Creative Art*, *Modern Monthly*, and *Studio*, meant that artists not in a position to view the panels first-hand were aware of the Detroit commission and able to see the murals in the accompanying reproductions.¹²⁷ What is most interesting about the reception of *Detroit Industry*, however, is that, as Hemingway observes, what stood as arguably the greatest example of socialist art, one that was both modern and public, was "virtually passed over in silence in the Communist press."¹²⁸ In fact, several years later, von Wiegand damned the Detroit murals in *New Masses* as clear evidence of Rivera's "abandonment of the revolutionary movement," further contending that "during his American visits, he began the production of marketable commodities and murals of compromise, such as those in Detroit."¹²⁹

¹²⁵ For example, the automobile industry saw their sales shrink by over two-thirds between 1929 and 1932 and Michigan's unemployment rate was almost double the national average; see Badger, *The New Deal*, p. 20. On the labour conditions at Ford and the relevant statistics see Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists*, p. 133.

¹²⁶ Objections to the murals were focused upon the following: i) the imagery was Communist propaganda; ii) religious issues with the "Preventive Medicine" panel, which was seen by some as a travesty of the Holy Family; iii) the murals were un-American and did not reflect 'native' concerns; and iv) more general complaints about their unsuitability for the Baroque style of the Garden Court. For a defense of the murals, and a published statement from Valentier. See: "Misconceptions" and "Men, Machines, and Murals — Detroit," *MA* 26.5 (May 1933), pp. 221; 254-5. For Rivera's explanation of the iconography and a response to claims of un-Americanness see "Dynamic Detroit — An Interpretation," *CA* 12.4 (April 1933), pp. 289-295 and "The Stormy Petrel of American Art: Diego Rivera on His Art," *Studio* 6 (July 1933), p. 24.

¹²⁷ For example *Modern Monthly* 7.5 (June 1933) reproduced several full-page illustrations of the Detroit murals.

¹²⁸ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 28. For one of the few responses to the Detroit murals see Jacob Burck, "A Portrait of Diego Rivera — The Story of a Bird in a Gold Frame," *DW*, 19 May 1934.

¹²⁹ Von Wiegand, "Portrait of an Artist," *NM* 23 (27 April 1937), p. 26.

If American Communists were sorely disappointed with the *Detroit Industry* murals, the storm generated by Rivera's *Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future* (fig. 10), commissioned for the lobby of the RCA Building of Rockefeller Center in October 1932, offered a more polemical message while clearly emphasizing the powerful potential inherent in public art.¹³⁰ Rivera began work on the mural in March 1933, which, after ten months of controversy, was ultimately destroyed in February 1934 due to the emblazoning of an incendiary socialist message, replete with an image of Lenin, on the walls of a \$250 million citadel of corporate capitalism. Given the criticism Rivera had recently suffered at the hands of the left, *Man at the Crossroads* has frequently been interpreted as an attempt to prove his political integrity and re-confirm his radicalism to his detractors, specifically those in the New York Communist Party. As Rivera described the iconography: "The crossed roads were the individualist, capitalist order, on the one hand, and the collectivist, socialist order, on the other; and Man, the Producer, in his triple personality of worker, farmer, and soldier, stood at their intersection."¹³¹ Styling himself as a "guerrilla fighter" who was forced to take his munitions from "the enemy," Rivera claimed to have constructed a political allegory aimed not at the Rockefellers, but at "the working people of New York."¹³²

Yet for the New York left, Rivera's radical imagery could not be assessed in isolation from his willingness to work for capitalist patrons and his apparent co-option by an imperialist society.¹³³ The Rockefellers were one of the richest oil families in the

¹³⁰ See Irene Herner de Larrea, *Diego Rivera's Mural at the Rockefeller Center* (Mexico City: Edicupes, 1990) and Robert Linsley, "Utopia Will Not Be Televised: Rivera at Rockefeller Center," *OAJ* 17.2 (1994), pp. 48-62.

¹³¹ Rivera, "The Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Art," *Modern Quarterly* 6.3 (Autumn 1932), p. 53; *Portrait of America* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1934), p. 21.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹³³ Rivera's murals did, however, find sympathetic evaluation later in the decade from the independent leftist Meyer Schapiro, who argued that it was entirely possible for art to conserve its revolutionary capacity, even when discrepancies existed between the ideology of the artist and the interests of the patron. He also pointed out the naiveté, if not outright hypocrisy, inherent in the left's denunciation of Rivera given that although he was charged with a betrayal of his public revolutionary art when he accepted bourgeois commissions in the US, it was never asked how such an art was possible in Mexico — a semi-colonial country dominated by foreign imperialism. Furthermore, by 1937, when Schapiro's text was published, the CPUSA had aligned itself with the Popular Front and he was able to isolate the contradiction involved in the left's denunciation of Rivera for supporting a regime that they

world and, for many, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., the patron of the mural, was seen as the ultimate manifestation of American capital.¹³⁴ Ironically, it was the announcement that Rivera's Rockefeller mural was to be destroyed that unequivocally pointed to the disruptive power of public art. While the Party and the left-wing press were in the process of ostracizing Rivera, the potential demolition of the murals put Communists and fellow-travellers in an ideological bind: on the one hand was the censorship of wealthy corporate capitalists, and on the other the repugnant opportunism of Rivera. Underscoring the complexity of issues faced by the left, and pointing to some of the conflicting impulses the Party was juggling in an effort to establish a uniform policy, Robert Minor expressed the difficulty in wishing to defend Rivera's image of Lenin as "the symbol of the revolutionary world Communist Party," while simultaneously wanting to condemn the artist's contradictory position as an "opportunist-nonrevolutionist" who had sold out to the likes of Ford and Rockefeller.¹³⁵ Making matters worse, the artist's Trotskyism presented a serious problem for the Party. Rivera may have openly identified himself as a Marxist, but he had been expelled from the Mexican Communist Party in 1929 (which enabled him to be regarded "officially" as a non-Communist by American patrons) and he was increasingly outspoken about his disdain for Stalin, whose leadership was symbolically pictured in the Rockefeller mural as a cancerous scourge upon Communism.

As a result, although Party officials and fellow-travellers did not wish to support Rivera's political position, they were fully prepared to denounce the barbaric act of cultural vandalism and ruthless curtailing of artistic freedom of expression being vested upon the artist's mural by their reactionary class enemies. Thus, despite the CPUSA's well-known condemnation of Rivera, the JRC organized a picket and joined

themselves had by then come to embrace. See Meyer Schapiro, "The Patrons of Revolutionary Art," *Marxist Quarterly* 1.3 (October-December 1937), pp. 462-466. See also Alicia Azuela, "Public Art, Meyer Schapiro and Mexican Muralism," *OAJ* 17.1 (1994), pp. 55-59 and Patricia Hills, "1936: Meyer Schapiro, *Art Front*, and the Popular Front," *OAJ* 17.1 (1994), pp. 30-41.

¹³⁴ Rockefeller's wife Abby Aldrich was one of the founders of MoMA and the couple was already collectors of Rivera's work, having purchased his sketchbook of the 1928 May Day parade in Moscow in 1931.

¹³⁵ Robert Minor, *DW*, 11 May 1933.

in the struggle against the mural's destruction.¹³⁶ Despite such protests, however, and given the anxiety over the "red peril" that escalated during the decade, not to mention the inarguable inappropriateness of the work for its site in a monument to capitalism, it is scarcely surprising that the mural was destroyed.¹³⁷ Not only did it pit socialism against capitalism, but the capitalist system was portrayed as diseased, decaying, and corrupt — hardly a welcome appraisal in the face of an ongoing economic Depression.¹³⁸

Yet while Rivera and his work were certainly well-known amongst American leftists, his choice of patrons, combined with his chameleon-like political viewpoint (demonstrated through his vacillation between satellite groups such as the Trotskyists and the Lovestonite Communist Party Majority Opposition, for whom he executed a mural cycle on American history in the New Workers' School in New York in 1933), proved difficult for Communists to embrace.¹³⁹ If, then, as Hemingway asserts, artistic role models were appraised in terms of ostensive commitment to Party discipline, the Mexican muralist most worthy of emulation was Siqueiros, a sophisticated modernist and staunch Stalinist.¹⁴⁰ As von Wiegand observed in a feature article on the artist in *New Masses* in 1934, Siqueiros, who arrived in the US in 1932 as a political exile from the Calles regime, was one of the rare "revolutionary innovators both in painting and in politics."¹⁴¹ He painted three murals in Los Angeles that expressed a revolutionary political message using radical technical means, such as a spray gun, nitrocellulose pigments, and photography in lieu of traditional preliminary drawings,

¹³⁶ See, for example, "Support for Rivera Protest is Urged by John Reed Club," *DW*, 16 May 1933; and "Workers, Artists Protest Ban on Lenin Mural Today," *DW*, 17 May 1933.

¹³⁷ In fact, the physical destruction of the mural *is* surprising (and was apparently unnecessary) as an agreement seems to have been arranged to remove it and transfer it to MoMA. Why such an arrangement failed to be implemented remains unclear; see Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists*, p. 173.

¹³⁸ Although it is commonly believed that the Rockefeller's were outraged by Rivera's Marxist political position, evidence suggests that not only did they acquiesce to the artist's subject matter, but that they actually encouraged it. See *ibid.*, p. 162.

¹³⁹ On the New Workers' School murals see E. M. Benson, "Field Notes," *MA* 27.2 (February 1934), pp. 97-98 and Rivera, *Portrait of America*, pp. 81-232.

¹⁴⁰ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 28. On Siqueiros in the 1930s see *Portrait of a Decade, 1930-1940: David Alfaro Siqueiros* (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de bellas Artes, 1997).

¹⁴¹ Von Wiegand, "David Alfaro Siqueiros," *NM* 11 (1 May 1934), p. 18.

and his work was featured in two solo shows in 1932.¹⁴² The murals, which were executed by a collective team, attack racism, imperialism and contemporary political conditions in Mexico, and as result of their strident message he was deported shortly thereafter. After spending 1933 in Argentina and Uruguay, where he and his team continued to paint murals, he arrived in New York in 1934, holding his first exhibition in the city at Alma Reed's Delphic Studios.¹⁴³

In contrast to the rather hostile reception on the part of Communists that greeted Rivera, Siqueiros was invited to speak at the JRC on at least three occasions, lecturing on the subject of "multireproducible" murals. Siqueiros returned to New York once again in 1936, opening an Experimental Workshop and, along with Orozco, participated in the American Artists' Congress Against War and Fascism as a Mexican delegate.¹⁴⁴ However, although Siqueiros would take on a more substantial role in the New York art world by the mid-1930s, his influence during the early years of the decade was predominantly on the West Coast and no major written appraisal of his work was published in the American art press until April 1934, when *Parnassus* featured a brief article following his arrival in New York earlier that year.¹⁴⁵

It was left to Orozco to furnish a relatively unproblematic exemplar for New York leftists. Although he was notorious for being the most politically equivocal of the muralists, he was nonetheless perceived by the left-wing press as "wholly a revolutionary" and von Wiegand deemed his US commissions "Our Greatest Mural Art."¹⁴⁶ Not only was his work accessible, primarily through his murals at the New

¹⁴² On Siqueiros's murals in Los Angeles see Shifra Goldman, "Siqueiros and Three Early Murals in Los Angeles," *Art Journal* (Summer 1974), pp. 321-327.

¹⁴³ Siqueiros's exhibition at the Delphic Studios included ten painted studies for murals and photographs of his murals in Los Angeles, Argentina, and Mexico.

¹⁴⁴ The workshop is now accorded significance primarily because Pollock was a participant; see Hurlburt, "The Siqueiros Experimental Workshop: New York, 1936," *Art Journal* 35.3 (Spring 1976), pp. 237-46. On the Congress see Monroe, "The American Artists' Congress and the Invasion of Finland," *AAAJ* 15.1 (1975), pp. 14-20; McCoy, "The Rise and Fall of the American Artists' Congress," *Prospectus* 15 (1990), pp. 283-297; Mathew Baigell and Julia Williams, eds, *Artist Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986); and Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, pp. 123-130.

¹⁴⁵ See Elsa Rogo, "David Alfaro Siqueiros," *Parnassus* 6.4 (April 1934), pp. 5-7.

¹⁴⁶ Brenner, "Orozco," *NM* 8.7 (February 1933), p. 22; von Wiegand, "Our Greatest Mural Art," *NM* 15

School for Social Research, his exhibitions at the Delphic Studio, and the publication of his prints, he was also understood to be a “modern” artist.¹⁴⁷ His murals for the New School were New York’s first example of Mexican muralism and today, remarkably, constitute one of the city’s only surviving permanent examples of that art.¹⁴⁸ While leftists had already been afforded the opportunity to see the artist’s work first-hand at a handful of New York exhibitions, the New School commission meant that a fully realized example of Mexican muralism was available for analysis.¹⁴⁹

Executed during the autumn of 1930 and completed in January 1931, Orozco’s murals were commissioned for the New School’s new quarters in Greenwich Village and were intended to reflect the progressive spirit of the institution (figs 11 and 12).¹⁵⁰ The School’s liberal director, Dr. Alvin Johnson, encouraged Orozco “to work within the framework of contemporary life [to] paint a subject he regarded as of such importance that no history written a hundred years from now could fail to devote a chapter to it.”¹⁵¹ Faced with such a mandate, Orozco took a broad international perspective on human struggle and revolutionary political conflict. He executed three panels presenting allegories of ideal human orders flanked by four side panels

(2 April 1935), p. 34.

¹⁴⁷ “Current Art Activities in New York,” *Parnassus* 2.2 (February 1930), p. 6. While the New School murals were the most convenient for New York artists to view first-hand, JRC artists such as James Guy and Walter Quirt periodically drove to Dartmouth College between 1932 and 1934 to watch the progress of the murals in the Baker Library; see Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, note 34, p. 290. On the Dartmouth murals see Renato González and Diane Miliotes, eds, *José Clemente Orozco in the United States, 1927-1934* (Hanover, N.H./New York: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College/Norton, 2002), pp. 142-185.

¹⁴⁸ Few murals painted by *los tres grandes* while in the US, whether portable or permanent, remain intact. While the New School murals remain in situ, to my knowledge the only other murals to survive are Rivera’s *The Agrarian Leader Zapata*, a portable fresco that MoMA purchased after his retrospective in 1931-1932 and Orozco’s *Divebomber and Tank*, a series of six portable panels commissioned by MoMA in 1940 for the exhibition *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*.

¹⁴⁹ For a comprehensive list of US exhibitions that included Orozco’s work during this period see González and Miliotes, *José Clemente Orozco in the United States*, p. 370. While I consider the ways in which the ideas and activities of Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros were received and debated by American artists and critics, they were not the only Mexican artists creating murals in the US; other artists included Covarrubias, Guerero Galván, O’Gorman, Ramos Martínez, Cueva del Río, and Tamayo.

¹⁵⁰ The New School also commissioned Benton to paint a cycle of murals entitled *America Today*, which are treated extensively elsewhere; see Emily Braun and Thomas Branchick, *Thomas Hart Benton: The America Today Murals* (New York: The Equitable Life Assurance Society/Williams College Museum of Art, 1985); see also Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*, pp. 67-88.

¹⁵¹ Alvin Johnson, unabridged manuscript for the published pamphlet “Notes on the New School Murals,” dated 20 August 1943, pp. 2-3, as cited in Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists*, note 89, p. 266.

depicting the political means of achieving such ends. The cycle, which begins in a lounge outside a fifth-floor refectory (now a hallway and conference room respectively), is introduced with an *Allegory of Science, Labor, and Art* (fig. 13). Inside the modestly-sized, low-ceilinged room, and covering approximately seventy metres of wall space, the south panel depicts the *Fraternity of All Men* (fig. 14), where a diverse collection of men gather around *The Table of Universal Brotherhood*. Standing directly opposite on the north wall is *The Homecoming of the Worker of the New Day* (fig. 15).¹⁵² The eastern and western walls deal with the Orient and the Occident, with Gandhi facing portraits of the slain Mexican socialist leader Felipe Carrillo Puerto and Lenin, who presides over a portrait of Stalin and the new Soviet social order (fig. 16).¹⁵³

The murals are among the most politically topical and optimistic in Orozco's oeuvre. For a man whose artistic vision, as Brenner commented, generally swung between "absolute tragedy and complete farce," the murals have not fit easily with prevailing notions of his frequently "bitter and grief-stricken" outlook or political non-partisanship.¹⁵⁴ Formally, their lack of spontaneity and rigid formal reliance on the geometrically-based compositional system of "Dynamic Symmetry" has often led to their characterization as an "inflexible and lifeless" aesthetic experiment.¹⁵⁵ The murals's thematic concern with the political possibilities of socialist revolution, however, marks the programme as a fundamentally Marxist one. Interestingly, while the rhetorical thrust of the imagery is not far from the conventions of Socialist Realism that were soon to be codified in the Soviet Union, Orozco deployed formal elements

¹⁵² Within the building's current configuration what was previously designated as the fifth floor is now the seventh.

¹⁵³ For general expositions of the murals see Alma Reed, *Orozco* (Dresden: Verlag 1979); David Elliott, *Orozco 1883-1949* (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1980) and González and Miliotes, *José Clemente Orozco in the US*, pp. 118-141. Interestingly, Hurlburt's analysis of the murals underscores the ways in which Orozco's imagery may be understood as a visual portrayal of the causes championed by progressive liberal intellectuals, asserting that the panels read as illustrations to the writings of social critics such as Charles Beard, John Dewey, and Thorstein Veblen; see Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists*, p. 4.

¹⁵⁴ Brenner, *Idols Behind Altars* (New York: Payson and Clarke, 1929), p. 270.

¹⁵⁵ Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists*, p. 52. Orozco discusses "Dynamic Symmetry" in his autobiography; see *An Autobiography*, trans. Robert C. Stephenson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962), p. 144.

culled from a modernist vocabulary. New York critics immediately recognized the “richness of form and colour” and the “bare simplicity” of his pictorial language.¹⁵⁶ Yet although he is the only one of his Mexican contemporaries who had not studied in Paris, the tension between figurative and abstract elements is of a decidedly European vintage. The fragmentation of forms and lack of clear narrative sequence, combined with the complex layering of planes, are directly indebted to Cubism. His paintings also demonstrate close affinities with Expressionism through what one New York critic described as his use of “direct technique, high colour, [and] primary forms.”¹⁵⁷

Sheldon Cheney, an early champion of modernism, foregrounded the “plasticity” of Orozco’s approach to pictorial form, praising him for achieving “a fine solidity of figures . . . without destroying the sense of flatness,” while avoiding the pitfalls of the merely “illustrational” in the handling of “material of equal human and social significance.”¹⁵⁸ What is most compelling about Cheney’s evaluation of Orozco is that his notion of modernism foregrounds muralism and a commitment to what he termed “art as a social stimulus.”¹⁵⁹ Although most contemporary American critics understood the mural as “social art,” few were prepared to address it from the standpoint of advanced formal techniques; in fact, the reverse was more often the case, with artists and commentators associating modernist practices with “autonomous” art and thus antithetical to “social art.”

An earlier review of Orozco’s work had appeared in *The Arts* in May 1929 and, shortly after the murals were unveiled at the New School, Goodrich wrote a lengthy analysis. Goodrich was not only a supporter of Orozco, he was also an advocate of mural painting, as demonstrated in his earlier writings for *The Arts*.¹⁶⁰ Lauding the commission as one of the “most interesting examples of mural decoration in American history,” he further deemed it to be “one of the rare occasions when artists of liberal

¹⁵⁶ Dorothy Leferts Moore, “Exhibitions in New York,” *The Arts* 15.5 (May 1929), p. 329.

¹⁵⁷ “Current Art Activities in New York,” p. 6.

¹⁵⁸ Sheldon Cheney, *Expressionism in Art* (New York: Liveright, 1934), pp. 296; 186-187.

¹⁵⁹ See Cheney, “Decorative Painting and Mural Sense,” *ibid.*, pp. 289-298.

¹⁶⁰ This article was a review of two Orozco exhibitions mounted in New York: one at the Art Students’ League and the other at the Downtown Gallery; see Moore, “Exhibitions in New York,” *The Arts* 15.5 (May 1929), pp. 328-329.

tendencies have been given a chance to express themselves on walls,” and he hoped this would establish a precedent.¹⁶¹ Not everyone was in agreement however. Formally, the interaction between the paintings and their architectural context, which demonstrated an understanding of advanced European thinking about the reciprocal relationship between modern art and architecture, was not well received within the mainstream press. *The New York Times* critic Edward Alden Jewell, who championed a more genteel decorative approach to muralism, expressed “with genuine regret” his disappointment and suggested that the room would have been better served by “a loosely flowing, continuous arabesque or a rhythmically ordered mosaic.”¹⁶²

It was, however, the particular cast of characters depicted by Orozco that caused the greatest stir, with the interracial *Table of Universal Brotherhood* and the Soviet panel taken as something of a provocation.¹⁶³ Johnson, however, allowed the offending images to remain, commenting that he was “willing to take a good deal of punishment for having done a thing that has shaken New York out of its complacency.”¹⁶⁴ Indeed, the controversy generated by the murals ensured that not only leftists were now acquainted with an example of a public art that fused revolutionary political ideology with modernist practices, and the critics at *New Masses* liked what they saw. In an article written in February 1933 Orozco’s artistic practice was assessed by Brenner as one of “technical, emotional and intellectual excellences.”¹⁶⁵ Furthermore, Orozco was also acclaimed as a “modern,” and later that year, following his participation in the second annual JRC exhibition in December, the artist’s *Negroes* was unequivocally commended by Lozowick as exemplary for its “militant ideology and

¹⁶¹ Goodrich, “The Murals of the New School,” *The Arts* 17.6 (March 1931), pp. 399–400. Goodrich’s portrait appears amongst the characters seated at Orozco’s *Table of Universal Brotherhood* and was painted from life when Johnson failed to appear for his sitting. According to Miliotes this was because Johnson feared political fallout and was concerned with his “place in history;” see González and Miliotes, *José Clemente Orozco in the United States*, p. 137; and note 83, p. 347.

¹⁶² Edward Alden Jewell, “The Frescoes by Orozco,” *NYT*, 25 January 1931.

¹⁶³ Orozco’s mural would later generate public controversy once again during the McCarthyite 1950s. The panel was covered by a curtain and New School director Hans Simon alluded to the possible destruction of the offending image; see Simon’s statement in “New School Keeps Red Mural Hidden,” *NYT*, 22 May 1953. The murals escaped demolition and in 1988, after almost sixty years of neglect, the New School announced plans to restore them; see *NYT*, 26 March 1988.

¹⁶⁴ Johnson as cited in Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists*, p. 54.

¹⁶⁵ Brenner, “Orozco,” p. 22.

good pictorial quality.”¹⁶⁶ Unsurprisingly, by 1935, Orozco was appraised by Alexander in *New Masses* as “the greatest artist of our time in the Western hemisphere” whose ideals, unlike those of a “cheaply opportunistic business man such as Rivera” are “unmistakably revolutionary in the interests of the working-class.”¹⁶⁷

The mural was quickly emerging as the almost necessary form for a revolutionary art amongst American leftists and in an early testament to the impact of Mexican muralism the New York JRC organized its *Decora* exhibition in March 1932.¹⁶⁸ Including project proposals for murals by Lozowick, Gellert, William Gropper, and Anton Refregier, the show positioned the mural as an “assertive” artform whose potential extended well beyond the merely “decorative.” Yet while the exhibition pamphlet claimed that “the mural today is a liberating medium,” it did not hold out much hope for modernists; muralism might indeed be the ideal vehicle for “social experience,” but modernism was deemed one of the “complacencies that contradict the intrinsic valor of the ‘fine arts.’”¹⁶⁹ Davis did not agree, and despite the skepticism on the part of fellow leftists, he stubbornly maintained that it was simply not incongruous that modernist practices could be engaged to produce socially-committed art.

In opposition to those who claimed that social meaning could only be visually transcribed in a figurative vocabulary, Davis steadfastly held that “form and content are a unity,” maintaining that there is no form without social content and no social content without form, and in his notes on the subject he used the example of the Mexican muralists to clarify his point.¹⁷⁰ Listing “Mexican Muralism” among the “outstanding trends in contemporary art,” one that “reflects a specific national, social, and political environment,” he saw the Mexican model as “a good example of the truth

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*; Lozowick, “JRC Show,” *NM* 10 (2 January 1934), p. 27.

¹⁶⁷ Alexander, “Orozco’s Lithographs,” *NM* 17 (19 November 1935), p. 29.

¹⁶⁸ That the mural was embraced as a suitable form of revolutionary art by Communists and fellow-travellers was further demonstrated by the fact that among the directives given to artists in the JRC’s “General Program of Activities,” adopted in 1932, was the instruction to paint murals in workers’s clubs and organization headquarters. Furthermore, the workshops on offer at the JRC School of Art, established in the autumn of 1931, featured a course on fresco technique by 1933 (in addition to classes in painting, drawing, sculpture, lithography, political cartoons and posters).

¹⁶⁹ Harry Alan Potamkin, *Decora* [exhibition pamphlet], JRC, March 1932.

¹⁷⁰ Davis papers, 30 September 1937. The latter half of this sentence is paraphrased from Davis’s notes.

of the form-content unity concept.”¹⁷¹ Yet although he viewed the “political sophistication” of Orozco (and even Rivera) as exemplary, he found their art wanting in that it was not *modern enough*. This, however, was the result of the specific cultural context in which their murals were produced. As Davis explained, because they worked in a provincial environment, their artistic form, which reflected that environment, was “historically obsolete” and “reactionary” (which was, however, certainly preferable to the American Scene painters, who constituted “another example of provincialism without the benefit of political sophistication”).¹⁷² In contradistinction to Rivera, who invoked the Soviet “rejection of modern art” to suggest that European formal developments were not appropriate to a proletarian art, Davis did not view modernism as irredeemably tied to the ideology of art-for-art’s sake — as a “hermetic art” that was “inaccessible except to those who have developed and undergone an elaborate esthetic preparation.”¹⁷³ Indeed, while Davis shared Rivera’s conviction that art could “serve as a weapon in the class struggle,” he did not believe that modern art had severed its connections with the world, instead arguing that modernism *was* the art of the masses.¹⁷⁴ It remained for Davis to put theory into practice, and this brings us back to the mural exhibition at MoMA.

Modernism, Murals, and the Museum of Modern Art

A year after the completion of Orozco’s murals for the New School and only five months after Rivera’s retrospective, MoMA opened *Murals by American Painters and Photographers* in May 1932. The show was curated by Lincoln Kirstein, a peer of Barr’s and a wealthy Harvard graduate who served as co-editor of *Hound and Horn*, one of the decade’s little magazines dedicated to international art and literature.¹⁷⁵ Like Barr, Kirstein spent much of the 1920s travelling abroad and quickly cultivated an interest in modernism. Concerned about the neglect of modern art in American institutions, he returned to the US convinced that “this country is the place to do

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ Rivera, “The Revolutionary Spirit,” p. 54.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁷⁵ On Kirstein see Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), especially pp. 122-145; and Kirstein, *Mosaic: Memoirs* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994).

something.”¹⁷⁶ Kirstein’s aim to promote American modernism was evident in his pitching of the mural exhibition. As a result of “recent controversy and current opportunity,” he wrote in the catalogue accompanying the show, “American interest in mural decoration has increased astonishingly during the past year.”¹⁷⁷ Yet while it was hoped that the show would encourage the use of murals in new buildings being constructed, Kirstein emphasized that the exhibition was intended “particularly to encourage American artists” who had suffered from a lack of opportunity to assert themselves in the wake of the Mexican “invasion.”¹⁷⁸

Guidelines for the exhibition required that a three-part study be submitted, with one section measuring 7 x 4 feet carried through to completion; any medium was permissible; and the subject matter was to be some aspect of “The Post-War World.” As von Wiegand observed, the prescribed subject marked a distinct departure from the majority of previous efforts in American mural painting. Not only was it a “social theme,” but “it laid down the principle that the mural should relate to contemporary life.”¹⁷⁹ The show included the work of thirty-four painters and twelve photographers, with panels completed by artists such as Hugo Gellert, William Gropper, George Biddle, Philip Evergood, Reginald Marsh, Jan Matulka, and Ben Shahn. Much to the museum’s dismay and embarrassment, the exhibition was steeped in controversy due to the inflammatory content of some of the murals and studies by certain radical leftists were almost excluded from the show because of their trenchant social critique. Gellert’s *Last Defense of Capitalism: ‘Us Fellas Gotta Stick Together — Al Capone’* and Gropper’s *The Writing on the Wall* (fig. 17) included unflattering portrayals of corporate capitalists as sleazy thugs and corrupt gangsters. The targets of such stinging satire included Andrew Mellon, J. P. Morgan, and J. D. Rockefeller (whose son Nelson was Chairman of the museum’s Advisory Committee and whose wife was Treasurer). Shahn’s now well-known panel *The Passion of Saaco and Vanzetti* (based on the right-hand section of his study) (fig. 18) was also nearly excluded, along with

¹⁷⁶ Kirstein as cited in Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr.*, p. 145.

¹⁷⁷ Kirstein, *Murals by American Painters and Photographers* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932), p. 5.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ Von Wiegand, “Mural Painting,” p. 797.

the work of several other artists whose images offered scathing indictments of contemporary American society.

Given the burgeoning topicality of muralism and the increasingly heated debates around commissions for corporate buildings such as the Rockefeller Center, radical artists such as Gellert and Gropper were concerned to preserve the mural's public character — the essential quality that differentiated the mural from easel painting and which made it an ideal form of revolutionary art. Distressingly, while Orozco had optimistically emphasized that the mural could not “be made a matter of private gain” or “hidden away for the benefit of a certain privileged few,” this was precisely what MoMA was about to do.¹⁸⁰ Two years before the destruction of Rivera's mural at Rockefeller Center leftists such as Gellert and Gropper were already conscious of the danger posed by capitalist “perversion,” and they were concerned to circumvent the co-option of the mural's radical potential. As Alexander would later argue in *New Masses*, American capitalists were also aware of the mural's capacity to function as a tool for propaganda and would thus subject the form to “multiple abuses.”¹⁸¹ Writing in 1935 with the benefit of hindsight, Alexander summarized the problem as follows:

[U]nder our system of private property individuals have segregated the mural from the public. Since only the wealthy can afford to own murals they are shaping the mural character either directly by dictating the subject-matter or indirectly by selecting an artist who will ‘out of his own choice’ produce the kind of mural desired.¹⁸²

As Alexander concluded, “the hysterical cry of ‘propaganda’ by the capitalist at the sight of revolutionary art is of course merely an attempt to cover up the fact of his own propaganda,” a conclusion that was confirmed by the MoMA exhibition.¹⁸³

The murals by Gellert, Gropper, and Shahn hardly fitted the museum's idea of “The Post-War World.” As president A. Conger Goodyear exclaimed: “How can Mr.

¹⁸⁰ Orozco, “New World, New Races, New Art,” p. xlvi.

¹⁸¹ Alexander, “Mural Painting in America,” *NM* 15 14.9 (26 February 1935), p. 28.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

Hoover come to the opening! and how can I face J. P. Morgan if these pictures are hung in the museum of which I am a trustee!"¹⁸⁴ Although MoMA subsequently informed the renegades that "any picture which can be interpreted as an offensive caricature or representation of a contemporary individual cannot be exhibited," a number of artists banded together and threatened to withdraw their murals if such censorship was permitted. Not wishing to draw any further publicity to what was turning into a first-rate fiasco, the museum backed down. The murals were hung, albeit in the most unfavourable location and with all photography forbidden. But as Gellert triumphantly announced in "We Capture the Walls!," a statement written for *New Masses* in June 1932, "the victory was the artists'."¹⁸⁵

Yet while radical artists had indeed demonstrated what could be achieved by uniting in the interest of a common cause, the exhibition was anything but well-received by liberal and conservative critics alike, a point clearly distilled in the title of the review that appeared in *The Art Digest*: "Critics Unanimously Condemn Modern Museum's Mural Show."¹⁸⁶ In stark contrast to the praise heaped upon the Mexican muralists in the popular press, the exhibition was deemed utterly "regrettable" by New York critics. According to James Johnson Sweeney, an early champion of modernism in the US who contributed to periodicals such as *Parnassus*, *Creative Art*, *Cahier d'Art*, and *The New Republic*, later serving as director of MoMA (1945-1946) and the Guggenheim (1952-1959), the show "proved fruitless in the field of mural production."¹⁸⁷ Dorothy Grafly, a much more aesthetically conservative critic than Sweeney, concluded that if the show had been intended to showcase the talents of American mural painters, then "the result is deplorable" and the entire exhibition "hovers on the borderland of bad taste."¹⁸⁸ Grafly also made clear her aversion to social criticism in art, conveying her disapproval of artists such as Gellert and Gropper who "take the opportunity to vent their spleen in radical propaganda with sketches that

¹⁸⁴ A. Conger Goodyear as cited in Gellert, "We Capture the Walls!" p. 29.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁸⁶ "Critics Unanimously Condemn Modern Museum's Mural Show," *The Art Digest* 6 (15 May 1932), p. 7.

¹⁸⁷ James Johnson Sweeney, "Murals by American Painters and Photographers," *CA* 10.6 (June 1932), pp. 437; 439.

¹⁸⁸ Dorothy Grafly, "Murals at the MoMA," *MA* 25.2 (August 1932), p. 93.

are no more mural than cartoons or caricatures in some hate-breeding news-sheet.”¹⁸⁹ But while such a barrage of negative reviews was profoundly frustrating for the artists, many of whom interpreted the response on the part of the press as serving to release both the museum and the architects of buildings such as Rockefeller Center from any obligation to proffer mural commissions to American artists, the show was not a loss.¹⁹⁰ If, as the critics lamented, the exhibition failed to demonstrate the native ability of American artists, it unequivocally announced that the New York left had adopted the mural as its own.

Stuart Davis and Modernist Muralism on the Left

Also among the murals included in the exhibition was Davis’s *Abstract Vision of New York*. As suggested at the beginning of this chapter the mural is significant for the ways in which it offers an early demonstration of his attempt to synthesize his political perspective with modernist practices.¹⁹¹ Although Davis had held leftist views throughout the teens and twenties, he was radicalized during the Depression and by 1935, having assumed the roles of both artist and activist, was insistent that Marxism was “the only scientific social viewpoint.”¹⁹² While scholars have tended to discuss his artistic and political concerns in isolation from each other, positing what Whiting terms a “stark disjunction” between the two, they should not be considered separately.¹⁹³ As Davis later made emphatically clear: “There are two contradictory theories of art. One says that the strength of art comes from the strength of its social

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ Gellert, “We Capture the Walls!” p. 29.

¹⁹¹ There is a vast body of literature on Davis and it is not my intention to offer a biography of his career. The definitive work is now *Stuart Davis: A Catalogue Raisonné — The Complete Works of Stuart Davis*, eds. Ani Boyajian and Mark Rutkoski, 3 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007). The best sources on Davis remain Lane, *Art and Theory*; and Diane Kelder, ed., *Stuart Davis* (New York: Praeger, 1971), which is largely comprised of writings by Davis.

¹⁹² Davis papers, 1 October 1935. Davis joined the staff of *The Masses* in 1913 and was subsequently associated with *New Masses*; he ceased to contribute to the latter after July 1926 and left the editorial board in the spring of 1929. Davis’s personal papers attest to the fact that he was thinking of art and culture in Marxist terms; it was not, however, until October 1935 that he started using Marxist terminology.

¹⁹³ Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*, p. 67.

meaning. The other says that its strength comes from esthetic form. In fact, the strength of art derives from both qualities.”¹⁹⁴

Abstract Vision of New York, which is based on motifs culled from a smaller tripartite study (fig. 19), brings together the style and iconography of mass culture with the modernist technique of collage.¹⁹⁵ Most of the highly schematized elements juxtaposed within the mural referenced contemporary events within the socio-political sphere, and Bruce Weber offers a concise inventory of Davis’s eclectic iconography.¹⁹⁶ Forming the vertical centre of the composition is the newly erected Empire State Building (completed in 1931) towering over the Manhattan skyline. At the top left is a smiling crescent moon, inscribed with the name of T. E. Powers, a well-known political cartoonist. Just below the moon is a brown derby, which reappears perched on a stylized banana to the lower left. As Weber notes, the derby was the trademark of recently defeated Progressive presidential candidate Al Smith, whose campaign song was based on the popular tune “Yes! We have no bananas!” Further allusions to Smith, who Davis greatly admired, include the overturned champagne glass, which alludes to Smith’s support for the repeal of prohibition. Other political references include the tiger’s head and tail, symbols of the Tammany Hall Democratic political group, then under investigation for corruption, specifically in the transportation industry, which is suggested by a gas pump. Sharing formal affinities with his next mural *Men Without Women* (executed in 1932 for a men’s smoking lounge in Radio City Music Hall after Davis was awarded one of the coveted Rockefeller commissions) (figs 20 and 21), these motifs are arranged without concern for narrative continuity or relative size, and are set within a shallow spatial structure.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ Davis papers, 30 August 1937.

¹⁹⁵ By December 1941 Davis separated the three sections of the mural study into individual paintings; from left to right they are now titled *Gasoline Pump* (Patricia Burrows and Milton Wolfson, Weston, Connecticut); *Pre-Wall* (Private collection, Bethesda, Maryland); and *T-View* (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.). See Boyajian and Rutkoski, *Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 3, cat. nos 1580-1582.

¹⁹⁶ Bruce Weber, *Stuart Davis’ New York* (West Palm Beach, Fla.: Norton Gallery and School of Art, 1985), pp. 12-16.

¹⁹⁷ Perhaps as a result of its patron and intended site, *Men Without Women* is less politically topical than *Abstract Vision of New York* and is comprised of a collection of common-place motifs linked with

Despite the mural's original title Davis was insistent that his art not be understood as abstract per se and he later re-titled the panel *New York Mural* as he became increasingly intent on differentiating his work from non-objective tendencies. The vital distinction for Davis was between an approach to abstraction that was idealist, as non-objectivity was, in contrast to one that was realist, which is how he understood his own work. Eschewing the ivory-tower isolationism and autonomy associated with a non-objective formal language, he was intent upon creating a democratically accessible modern art grounded in common experience. Although his art does not adhere to more conventional definitions of pictorial realism, he was adamant that his work be approached in this way. As early as 1923 he had already stated in his notebooks that realism was not merely defined by the presence of recognizable subject matter and he concurred with Orozco's lament over "the stupidity of confusing life itself with representations of it."¹⁹⁸ Writing in 1927 he further clarified his stance: "In the first place my purpose is to make realistic pictures. I insist upon this definition in spite of the fact that the type of work I am now doing is generally spoken of as abstraction People must be made to realize that in looking at abstraction they are looking at pictures as objective and as realistic in intent as those commonly accepted as such."¹⁹⁹ He later summed the issue up in an admirably droll statement: "A radio is the product of an extremely complex set of abstract generalizations but no one calls it 'an abstraction' or 'an escape from reality' because the loud speaker is not equipped with a set of teeth."²⁰⁰

But did Davis's style have the connotations he claimed for it? Beyond including references to newsworthy issues and thereby contributing to public discourse about

men's leisure and diversion, such as a pipe, playing cards, automobiles, and race horses. The canvas was re-titled *Mural* when it was rescued from the Music Hall by MoMA in 1974. It was subsequently restored for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Davis retrospective in 1991 and has now been returned to its original home. For a recent analysis of the mural's iconography which links it to Davis's earlier *Lucky Strike* paintings see Barbara Zabel, *Assembling Art: The Machine and the American Avant-Garde* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), pp. 63-82.

¹⁹⁸ Davis papers, [undated] 1923; Orozco as cited in Brenner, *Idols Behind Altars*, p. 273.

¹⁹⁹ Davis to Edith Halpert, 11 August 1927, Downtown Gallery records, Archives of American Art (AAA), Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

²⁰⁰ Davis as cited in Brian O'Doherty, *American Masters: The Voice and the Myth* (New York: Universe Books, 1988), p. 78.

current events (a modernist strategy whose pedigree, like that of collage, lay with synthetic Cubism), in what ways can his formal armature be understood as realist?²⁰¹ Moreover, what of the political import he accorded to a realist practice premised upon modernist techniques? Indeed, while Davis's political perspective was consonant with that of Social Realists such as Gellert, Gropper, and Shahn, he was not interested in *illustrating* the causes championed by the left. Furthermore, while other leftists contributed murals to the exhibition that took New York as their subject, such as Ernest Fiene's *Aviation* (fig. 22) and Glenn Coleman's *The Old and the New* (fig. 23), both of which pictured the Manhattan skyline replete with the harbour below and aircraft flying overhead, or Morris Kantor's *Union Square, New York* (fig. 24), which depicts a labour rally set within a contemporary street scene, Davis did not equate realism with passive reflection, and this is where a normative approach to realism must be distinguished from a critical one.²⁰²

To begin with, Davis's mural is executed in oil laid on canvas with a palette knife, and this emphasis on materiality was not without political correlates. Just as Courbet's "demonstrative palette-knife application of paint . . . produces an insistent sense of the material quiddity of things," Davis's rough impasto draws the viewer's attention to both the physical reality of the artist's pictorial means and to the social reality of what he depicts.²⁰³ Further augmenting the emphatic materiality of the picture surface, the mural is entirely devoid of modelling and chiaroscuro; there is no suggestion of atmospheric depth and the composition is comprised of blocks of bold, saturated colours whose contrasts are heightened by large masses of black and white. Deploying

²⁰¹ Collage is, of course, also associated with photomontage and the political perspective allied with this technique, especially as put into practice by artists such as Heartfield, should have made it appealing to leftists; however, it remains something of a puzzle why there was very limited take-up, even given the more general skepticism towards modernist strategies on the part of the left. For example Gellert's photomontage *What's It All About?* in *New Masses* 4.2 (July 1928), p. 16 does not seem to have catalyzed further interest, although the JRC's American Artists School did advertise a lecture on the topic in 1938; see Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 133; 280 and note 4, p. 335. There were several examples of photomontage in the photomural section of the MoMA exhibition, including those by Bernice Abbott and Georgia O'Keefe.

²⁰² On Fiene see *Ernest Fiene, Art of the City, 1925-1955* (New York: The Galleries, 1981); on Coleman see *Glenn O. Coleman, Memorial Exhibition* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1932); and on Kantor see *Six Living American Artists* (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, 1939).

²⁰³ Hemingway, "The Realist Aesthetic," p. 110.

a number of anti-naturalistic techniques that undermine the traditional mimetic relationship between art and reality, the mural does, however, contain vestigial naturalistic clues such that the identity of each element can still be deciphered. This is not to say that all of the myriad elements are immediately recognizable, and this points to what Hemingway identifies as a “general truth” about realism (one similarly manifested in Courbet’s work), namely that “it is not when the sign appears to provide transparent denotation that it functions as realist in the most interesting sense, but when it maintains a measure of awkward opacity.”²⁰⁴ For Davis, this “awkward opacity,” achieved through *de*-naturalizing modernist devices, revitalized realism and made it viable as a means of radicalizing social consciousness. In order to develop new, more dynamic ways of perceiving the world, he believed that the artist must, as Jakobson put it, “impose a new form upon our perception, if we are to detect in a given thing those traits which went unnoticed the day before.”²⁰⁵

Davis conviction that the effectiveness of realism as a socially useful art was contingent upon an infusion of modernist techniques was not generally embraced by fellow New York leftists. While many critics were prepared to accommodate modernism to some degree and recognized that the revolutionary artist could not ignore “plastic discoveries produced by bourgeois art,” Davis’s approach nonetheless challenged the left’s persistent tendency to characterize modernism as symptomatic of an escapist evasion of social reality aligned with bourgeois individualism and apathy.²⁰⁶ Several months after the MoMA exhibition closed, Burck was surely taking aim at Davis’s mural when he wrote in *New Masses* that he had seen more than enough “bananas and prisms” and did not regard this as suitable to a “social viewpoint in art.”²⁰⁷ Davis’s view on what constituted social art was more nuanced. While he took his political cues from the Soviet model, he maintained that bourgeois society

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ Jakobson, “On Realism in Art,” p. 40.

²⁰⁶ Burck, “For Proletarian Art,” *American Mercury* 34.135 (March 1935), p. 226.

²⁰⁷ Burck, “Sectarianism in Art,” *NM* 8.8 (April 1933), p. 27.

had produced great art and, furthermore, art that was formally and technically superior to that being produced by both the Soviets and the Mexicans.²⁰⁸

As is evident, the New York art world was traversed by a diversity of political and visual ideologies during the early years of the 1930s. Looking to different models and enunciating competing claims for the modern, artists and critics engaged in pointed polemics as they sought to define an aesthetic philosophy that was both American and socially responsible. If during the 1930s left-wing modernists such as Davis were unable to follow the artistic lead of their Soviet political mentors, whose denunciation of modernism could hardly be denied by the middle of the decade, the Mexican muralists had achieved a social art that was in many ways exemplary. As Davis later summed up in his notes, while the Mexican model was lacking in formal sophistication, it nevertheless provided important lessons for American artists: “Here is an advanced, realistic ideology, based on experience, and definitely progressive as a group movement. It has its own technology (fresco mural) and is developing its own space-color sense which is very nationalistic.”²⁰⁹

As the Depression wore on muralism took root in America and the Mexican example of government support for the arts would soon be put into practice. Following the debacle at MoMA and the handful of private commissions offered to artists during the early years of the decade, the primary opportunities to paint murals would, with the establishment of the PWAP in 1933, come under the auspices of Roosevelt’s New Deal Administration. Wide-reaching in terms of geographical scope, financial commitment, and ideological import, this new government initiative seemed to promise, as Hemingway asserts, “a fundamental transformation in the nature of patronage and long-term relations between artists and the state.”²¹⁰ And while, as Lane observes, modernists such as Davis would continually be forced to address “skepticism about the relevance of modern art to the times,” with modernism facing charges throughout the decade that it was aesthetically outmoded, escapist, and un-

²⁰⁸ Davis papers, 10 January 1938.

²⁰⁹ Davis papers, 24 March 1937.

²¹⁰ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 75.

American, his murals of the early 1930s constitute an important attempt to devise an artform whose very scale and public address were capable of transcending the conventions of the private easel picture, and whose engagement with modernist techniques was geared toward a politically-committed form of expression.²¹¹

²¹¹ Lane, *Art and Theory*, p. 35.

Chapter Two

The Public Works of Art Project: A New Deal for American Modernism

Roosevelt arrived in the White House in March 1933. His inauguration of government patronage for the arts under the New Deal administration the following December established an unprecedented forum for the development of the mural as a public artform. Vast in scale, the federal art projects offered a radical alternative to the relations between artist, patron and public determined by the exigencies of the market system.²¹² The central question addressed in this chapter is the degree to which early New Deal cultural initiatives, namely those established within the context of the PWAP, were politically and ideologically able to accommodate leftist artists with a commitment to modernist aesthetics. The art actually produced under the aegis of federal patronage is almost invariably dismissed as formally unsophisticated and aesthetically retardataire. Such criticism, while in many instances not unwarranted, is nonetheless misleading in relation to the whole. It is my contention that the arts projects provided an important and undervalued context for the development of modernism. My main objective in what follows is to address the ways in which leftist artists negotiated the political mandates of the CPUSA and the New Deal state in order to achieve a rapprochement between modernist practices and radical politics in the dominant variant.

²¹² The history of the New Deal art projects has been dealt with elsewhere and I will not rehearse that history here. Early studies include William McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969); Berman, *The Lost Years*; O'Connor, ed., *The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1972); O'Connor, ed., *Art for the Millions*; Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz, *New Deal for Art: The Government Art Projects of the 1930s with Examples from New York City and State* (Hamilton, N.Y.: Gallery Association of New York State, 1977); and McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*. These studies were followed by Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation*; Karal Ann Marling, *Wall to Wall America: A Cultural History of Post office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982); Park and Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984); and Melosh, *Engendering Culture*.

The Depression and the New Deal

When Roosevelt took office in the spring of 1933 it had become apparent that the financial crisis in America was not merely a temporary downturn in an otherwise healthy economy.²¹³ According to George Soule's gloomy forecast in *The New Republic*, the present cycle of declining production and mounting unemployment was setting the stage for a depression unprecedented in American history. According to Soule, who had assumed editorship of the liberal journal in 1923 and thereafter served as its most authoritative voice on economic affairs, the roots of the crash could be traced to the artificial prosperity of the 1920s. Echoing the assessment of many intellectuals who had become ever more disenchanted with the idealism of the Progressive era, Soule believed that such a collapse was inevitable. During the previous decade technological progress had increased industrial production to a point where the capacity of domestic and foreign markets to absorb the goods was now saturated. Once such a glut had been established, the downward spiral of the American economy was unavoidable unless federal reforms were used to establish balance and order within the chaos of the existing system.²¹⁴

By 1932 earlier hopes for a swift recovery were abandoned. Many liberal intellectuals now recognized that after some three hundred years of expansion and growth America was entering a new phase in its development that demanded a move towards consolidation.²¹⁵ But before such long-term planning could be addressed and put into effect, the exigencies of the current economic calamity needed to be tackled. The winter of 1932-1933 was the worst in US economic history and after three years of mounting depression the nation's financial systems lay mortally wounded. Jettisoning Hoover's laissez-faire attitude and setting aside the rhetoric of individualism, Roosevelt quickly reversed many of his predecessor's policies in relation to public spending. During its first Hundred Days in office the administration embarked upon an intense period of legislative activity. Driving through the Agricultural Adjustment Act,

²¹³ For the best overview of the period see Badger, *The New Deal*; for a compilation of key writings by New Dealers and their critics see Howard Zinn, ed., *New Deal Thought* (1966; Cambridge, Mass.: Hackett Publishing, 2003).

²¹⁴ Soule, "Gold and the Industrial Depression," *TNR*, 12 November 1930, p. 343.

²¹⁵ On liberal alternatives to the existing capitalist system see Pells, *Radical Visions*, pp. 69-76.

the Emergency Banking Act, and the National Industrial Recovery Act, Congress passed the most sweeping economic programme in American history. Enacted with the support of the Democratic Party and aimed at stemming the effects of the Depression, these measures were accompanied by a wave of government relief initiatives, along with massive government spending on public works projects, such as the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the Public Works Administration.

The interventionist measures undertaken by the New Deal government marked a seminal shift in the relations between the state and its citizens. One of the key federal relief measures inaugurated during the first Hundred Days was the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), a grant-in-aid programme aimed at obviating mass distress by alleviating the plight of the unemployed.²¹⁶ Roosevelt appointed Harry Hopkins, one of his more liberal advisors and a champion of extensive social reform, to run the new agency. Although Hopkins was born in rural Iowa and educated at Grinnell College, he epitomized New Deal ideals for urban America. Quickly emerging as a key figure in the development of New Deal strategy, he had extensive experience in social work and was previously the director of the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration in New York state when Roosevelt was Governor. Starting out with a \$500 million grant to the states for relief, the running of FERA was, of necessity, characterized by speed and flexibility, with Hopkins allegedly spending \$5 million within the first two hours of taking office.²¹⁷ He was, however, unsatisfied with simply dishing out the dole. Like other progressive members of the administration he preferred “work relief” to “direct relief” as a means of preserving both the skills and self-esteem of America’s growing legions of unemployed. The work relief principle, which was more expensive to administer and therefore found little support among conservatives at state level, was a fundamental premise of the establishment of the PWAP.

²¹⁶ For an overview of FERA see Badger, *The New Deal*, pp. 191-196.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

Within a few months it became clear that FERA was unable to deal with the scale of the unemployment crisis and in November 1933 Hopkins secured \$400 million to establish the Civil Works Administration (CWA), a work relief programme administered on a federal basis.²¹⁸ Although the majority of jobs created were in construction, the CWA was also responsible for the establishment of the PWAP. Set up in December 1933 with a grant to the Treasury Department, the project was intended to alleviate the poverty of unemployed artists by putting them to work on the embellishment of public buildings. Directed by Edward Bruce, the project had no means test and workers did not have to come from the relief rolls. Costing the American government \$1,312,117 and employing some 3,749 artists, the project was responsible for the creation of 706 murals and mural sketches, 3,821 oil paintings, 2,938 watercolours, 1,518 prints, and 647 sculptures.²¹⁹

The PWAP was, however, short-lived. Opposition from staunch fiscal conservatives to the financial toll the CWA took on the federal budget led to its demise by March 1934. With the closedown of the CWA the art project was also brought to an end, although Hopkins secured funds from FERA to wind up its activities. Yet while the PWAP lasted less than a year, its historical significance should not be underestimated. As the first federal art initiative, precedents were set for subsequent government projects and much of the ideological framework for New Deal state patronage was established. Moreover, despite its brevity the PWAP was a landmark in American cultural policy. For the first time in history the artist was recognized as a *worker* by the federal government.

The PWAP

According to standard accounts the seed for the first of the federal art projects was planted in the form of a letter sent to Roosevelt in May 1933 from his old Groton

²¹⁸ For an overview of the CWA see *ibid.*, pp. 197-200.

²¹⁹ These are the figures compiled in a final report for FERA on the PWAP: "Report of the Assistant Secretary of the Treasury to Federal Emergency Relief Administrator, December 8, 1933-June 30, 1934" (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1934).

school friend George Biddle.²²⁰ An artist and mural painter who had traveled around Mexico with Rivera in 1928, Biddle came from an upper-class Philadelphia family and graduated with a law degree from Harvard University before he went abroad to study art in Paris. Like other archetypal New Dealers, he was a liberal member of the urban elite and he fitted well into the “collective portrait” painted by Thomas Krueger and William Glidden of those who Roosevelt gathered around him.²²¹

Although the President responded enthusiastically to Biddle’s suggestion that the government should follow the lead of Mexico and establish a public mural programme, Biddle’s letter should not, as Hemingway asserts, “be elevated to the status of single cause for what followed.”²²² While the letter offered a coherent ideological rationale for federal patronage — one that was steeped in nationalist rhetoric — by 1933 interest in public murals had increased significantly. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, prior to the inauguration of the projects, the benefits of a state-funded mural art had already been voiced in the pages of journals such as *Creative Art*, *The Arts*, and the *Magazine of Art*.²²³ Liberals and leftists were equally aware of the precedent that had been set in Mexico, and in September 1933, at the

²²⁰ George Biddle to President Roosevelt, 9 May 1933, Biddle papers, AAA, Reel 3621. For a public statement of the ideas adumbrated in the letter see Biddle, “An Art Renaissance Under Federal Patronage,” *Scribner’s Magazine* (June 1934), p. 428; see also “Mural Painting in America,” *MA* 27.7 (July 1934), pp. 361-371.

²²¹ That being said, Biddle supported the increased politicization of the art milieu in the 1930s and he contributed works to JRC exhibitions. For example, he contributed a lithograph on the theme of Sacco and Vanzetti to the *Social Viewpoint in Art* exhibition in January 1933. Later that year in December, on the occasion of the *Hunger Fascism War* show (which took its title from the code words used in the Party’s frequent critiques of the New Deal) he contributed a lithograph of the imprisoned labour martyr Tom Mooney, along with a large painting entitled *Hunger*, which was well-received in the Communist press and later used as an illustration in the “Revolutionary Art” issue of *New Masses* in October 1935. For a laudatory account of Biddle’s work see Lozowick, “JRC Show,” *NM* 10 (2 January 1934), p. 27. Biddle’s position within the art world is thus one that highlights the complexity of leftist positions; for while he was willing to have his works associated with Communist organizations such as the JRC and *New Masses*, he was an ardent New Deal liberal — a position which was completely incongruous with the current Party line at this point. Biddle discusses his politics in *An American Artist’s Story* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1939), pp. 306-316.

²²² Hemingway, *Artist on the Left*, p. 80.

²²³ For example, see George Cox, “Modern Art and This Matter of Taste,” *MA* 25.2 (August 1932), pp. 79-82; Philippa Gerry Whiting, “Rockefeller Center Debut,” *MA* 26.2 (February 1933), pp. 84-85; “Millions for Laborers, Not One Cent for Artists,” *MA* 26.12 (December 1933), pp. 521-522. *The Arts* was defunct by the time the New Deal administration was in office and *Creative Art* only lasted for a few months longer.

behest of the Cultural Commission of the Party, the executive board of the JRC was already encouraging its members to organize unemployed artists to agitate for a programme of federal patronage. My point here is that despite received notions that state-funding for public art during the New Deal era was the brainchild of reformist Democrats, Washington was actually “adding money and incentive to a contest already raging, with fairly high stakes and several political inflections.”²²⁴

Biddle’s plan for a government art project was essentially an elitist one that would hardly serve to alleviate the plight of unemployed artists. His scheme called for offering commissions to fewer than a dozen of the most notable artists in America, including Benton, Marsh, Henry Varnum Poor, Robinson, Maurice Sterne, and Edward Laning, each of whom had assured him of their support.²²⁵ Also among his favoured artists were John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood. As is evident from Biddle’s roster of artists, the particular aesthetic he supported, while not modernist, was, as outlined in my introduction, understood to be ‘modern’ in the broad sense that the term was then being used. Furthermore, he was unequivocal about the importance of a specifically nationalist subject matter, a stance he shared with Edward Bruce, who would ultimately head up the PWAP.

Bruce graduated from Columbia University and amidst a career that involved law and international trade he became a painter during the 1920s, spending the remainder of the decade studying abroad. By 1930 he was widely acclaimed as one of the leading American landscape painters, with his works receiving laudatory reviews in major art periodicals.²²⁶ Leo Stein, an art critic and friend of Bruce’s, judged his works superior to those of Matisse in that Bruce did not find that “art and nature are incompatible with each other.”²²⁷ Moreover, while his works were deemed by many to be ‘modern,’

²²⁴ Lee, *Painting on the Left*, p. 128.

²²⁵ Biddle, Transcript of Diaries 1933-1941, Biddle papers, AAA Reel 3621.

²²⁶ On Bruce see Italo Tavalato, *Edward Bruce* (Rome: Valori Plastici, 1926); Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation*, pp. 31-37; and Hemingway, *Artist on the Left*, pp. 80-84. Reviews include Leo Stein, “Edward Bruce,” *CA* 3.5 (November 1928), p. 1; L[eila]. M[echlin], “The Art of Edward Bruce,” *MA* 21.2 (February 1930), pp. 75-81; Edwina Spencer, “Edward Bruce,” *CA* 12.2 (February 1933), pp. 97-107; and Olin Dows, “Edward Bruce, An Appraisal,” *MA* 30.1 (January 1937), pp. 6-12.

²²⁷ Stein, “Edward Bruce,” p. 1.

I must again underscore the capaciousness of this term in period art discourse.²²⁸ Bruce may have employed a conservatively formalist aesthetic but by 1931 he was clear about his position that “modern art is foreign to our real tastes.”²²⁹ Upon returning to the US, Bruce became an exponent of the “nativist” trend toward the American Scene, opining that the only obstacle in the way of an American artistic renaissance was an unfortunate and unnecessary “inferiority complex” in relation to European developments.²³⁰

Although Bruce’s paintings received critical acclaim, the art market was faltering under the yoke of the Depression, and he was forced to return to law.²³¹ In 1932 he went to Washington, D.C., and by June 1933 Roosevelt appointed him US delegate to the London Economic Conference. His recent appointment to the Treasury Department meant that Bruce was in the right place at the right time to become a leading ideologue in promoting and running the PWAP. Taken together, his aesthetic proclivities, social position, and commitment to “philanthropic idealism” made him a perfect cultural representative for the state.²³²

Like other New Dealers, Bruce believed that in addition to providing every American family with an adequate standard of living, art should become part of the nation’s everyday life. By the autumn of 1933 he had formulated the outlines for a public art programme that, in exchange for “mechanics’ wages,” would employ artists to embellish publicly-funded buildings.²³³ Following a dinner party where he gathered

²²⁸ For Bruce’s own encapsulation of his aesthetic position see “What I am Trying to Do,” CA 3.5 (November 1928), pp. xlv-xlix.

²²⁹ Bruce as cited in “Lawyer Quits Business for Career as Artist,” *Oakland Post Enquirer*, 14 February 1931.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

²³¹ At this point Bruce had completed a mural entitled *San Francisco and the Bay* for the San Francisco Stock Exchange in 1928 (where Rivera executed his *Allegory of California* mural in 1931).

²³² Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation*, p. 36.

²³³ Bruce, Government Support of Arts and Crafts [memorandum], c. 10 November 1933, Biddle papers, AAA, Reel, P17. As Dows (future director of the Treasury Relief Art Project) later observed, such a scheme was not without precedent. Not only had artists been paid a salary for their work by the Mexican Government in the 1920s, but closer to home Robinson received a similar form of remuneration for his murals at Kaufmann’s Department store in Pittsburgh in 1929 and Poor had written to the *New York Times* to suggest a group payment after MoMA’s mural exhibition in 1932; see Dows, “Edward Bruce,” p. 7.

together a high-powered group of officials in order to convince them of the merits of his plan, he was able to write to Biddle that the evening had been a great success and the arts project had indeed received unanimous endorsement.²³⁴ On 29 November 1933 the first federally supported art project in the US was announced, and by 8 December the PWAP was underway with a grant of \$1,034,754 from the CWA to the Treasury Department.²³⁵ Sufficient funds were initially allotted to make work possible until mid-February the following year and plans were in place to employ 2,500 artists, with the first hired on 9 December.²³⁶ Bruce was appointed by Hopkins to direct the project, and under his guidance sixteen regional committees, which would review applications and select artists in their area, were organized under existing CWA provisions.²³⁷ The Washington office was staffed by Forbes Watson, who Bruce personally selected as Technical Director, and Edward Rowan, who assumed the post of Assistant Technical Director. Although the project was conceived as a temporary measure, the ideological rationale for government patronage promulgated by administrators did not reflect a short-term initiative and was premised upon a permanent shift in the orientation of the production and reception of American art.

The Ideology of the PWAP

Among the key ideologues associated with the PWAP, Watson was perhaps the most committed champion of modernist aesthetics. Fulfilling the profile of the New Deal urban intellectual, he was educated at Harvard and Columbia Law School, but began a career as an art critic for the *New York Evening Post*, where he remained from 1911 to 1917, later writing for the *New York World* from 1918-1931. Prior to his appointment with the federal art projects, from 1923 to 1933 he was also editor of *The Arts*, a progressive magazine that operated with a pro-modern (if not modernist) stance. Like

²³⁴ The guests at the dinner included Lawrence Robert (Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Department); Justice Stone, H. T. Hunt (General Counsel for the PWA); Rexford Tugwell (Under Secretary of State for Agriculture); Frederic A. Delano (Director of the National Planning Commission); Charles Moore (Chairman of the Fine Arts Commission); and Harry Hopkins (Civil Works Administrator). Bruce to Biddle, 22 November 1933, AAA, Reel P17.

²³⁵ Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation*, p. 41.

²³⁶ Edward Rowan, "Will Plumber's Wages Turn the Trick?" *MA* 27.2 (February 1934), p. 80.

²³⁷ It is a testament to widespread support for the project that these committees were comprised of some 600 men and women working in the art milieu who volunteered their services to supervise activities.

Bruce, Watson believed that the PWAP presented an important opportunity to foster a unifying national culture while reformulating the fundamental relations between art and the state and, by extension, between artist and public. Through federal patronage, not only could the government transform the artist's role in society, but by bringing art from the margins to the mainstream of culture, the "government is bringing the artist into far closer touch with his community and thereby into closer touch with American life."²³⁸

Watson also served as associate editor of two liberal and highly influential publications, *Parnassus*, the journal of the CAA, and the *Magazine of Art*, the organ of the American Federation of Art.²³⁹ Together, these journals served as the main forums in which administrators set out the rationale for New Deal art and articulated the ideology of the PWAP. In a particularly bald bit of rhetoric Audrey McMahon (who was the President of the CAA, an editor of its journal, and the future head of the FAP in New York) penned the following call to action in *Parnassus* in October 1933: "Throughout the land are vast public buildings with glaring, hideous walls — these can be decorated and art brought to the people of every community Or shall our walls remain blank, and blank the minds of our people to art, and blank of hope the lives of our artists?"²⁴⁰

While it should be kept in mind that Bruce and Watson were not the sole tastemakers for PWAP art and their ideals, like those of fellow administrators, would always be

²³⁸ Watson, "The Public Works of Art Project: Federal, Republican or Democratic?" *MA* 27.1 (January 1934), p. 8.

²³⁹ The College Art Association was instrumental in setting up an earlier relief art programme. In 1932 they petitioned the Emergency Work Bureau of the Gibson Committee to create a department to put unemployed artists to work on public walls. By August 1933 approximately one hundred artists had been placed and some \$20,000 had been paid in salaries. Some fifteen murals were painted for non-profit institutions, such as schools and churches, and each institution was responsible for paying for the materials. For more on the Emergency Work Bureau see Audrey McMahon, "May the Artist Live?" *Parnassus* 5.5 (October 1933), pp. 1-4. The American Federation of Art was founded during the early years of the century with the urban reform movement and it was a progressive organization committed to public culture. The magazine's coverage included an eclectic range of topics, such as landscape design and urban planning, along with more traditional art-historical topics and articles on contemporary artistic practice. Under the editorship of Leila Mechlin it was not particularly sympathetic to modernism, but this shifted when F. A. Whiting took over the post in 1931.

²⁴⁰ McMahon, "May the Artists Live?" p. 4.

pursued in a complex context complicated by bureaucracy and politics, their shared preference for the American Scene was manifested in much federal art. In an article written for the *Magazine of Art* three months after the PWAP got underway, Bruce laid out his views, assuring readers that it was “a native product” characterized by “a fine quality of naturalness” and “amazingly free from isms and fads and so-called modern influences.”²⁴¹ Watson’s aesthetic was less conservative and in his writings he frequently questioned whether the American Scene was not just “a little too terrifically ingenious,” encouraging readers to get out their Currier and Ives to see “if ‘going American’ is quite as original as Mr. Benton, Iowa, and the cohorts of Fourteenth Street think it is.”²⁴² But while he took shots at the “two-fisted American ballyhoo school,” his support for modernist tendencies was nonetheless bound up with a pointed desire to promulgate a specifically *American* modernism.²⁴³ As Watson confirmed for readers of *The Arts* wary of foreign aesthetic imports: “to choose a measuring scale in Paris by which to gage the modernity or lack of modernity of American artists can lead only to fallacies.”²⁴⁴

Watson and Bruce were also concerned to address the isolation of the artist. While the Depression brought into stark relief the need for a complete overhaul of the prevailing patronage system, they both believed that the art market was already failing in much broader terms. As early as 1927 Watson lamented the fact that art had such a limited appeal within the larger culture and was produced for such a “highly specialized audience.”²⁴⁵ For Watson it was the “snobbishness inherent in the erstwhile ‘star’ system” and the “falsified values” fostered by dealers that were largely responsible for forcing artists to produce on speculation for an uncertain market.²⁴⁶ As he stated, “the artificialities in the process of conveying the work of art from the isolated studio in which it was made to the home of the high spender in which it rested had reached the

²⁴¹ Bruce, “Implications of the Public Works of Art Project,” *MA* 27.3 (March 1934), p. 113.

²⁴² Watson, “A World Without Elegance,” *Parnassus* 7.4 (May 1935), p. 48; “Pittsburgh Postpones its Awakening,” *Parnassus* 6.6 (November 1934), p. 16.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁴ Watson, “The All American Nineteen,” *The Arts* 16.5 (January 1930), p. 310.

²⁴⁵ Watson, “Henri Matisse,” *The Arts* 11.1 (January 1927), pp. 33-38.

²⁴⁶ Watson, “The Artist Becomes a Citizen,” *Forum* (May 1934), pp. 279; 277.

acme of their suave and complex mysteries.”²⁴⁷ Communists and fellow-travellers agreed. As Burck opined in *New Masses*, “until the economic crisis, art . . . was entirely snobbish, individualistic expression based on the ‘gold standard’ of bourgeois society.”²⁴⁸ For a culture that had not yet embraced artistic production as a necessity, art had become a fashionable badge that people liked to pin on their lapels “as a sign of social honor and distinction.”²⁴⁹ Moreover, as a result of their vanity, patrons had come to prefer known “stars,” necessitating that artists create a fashionable persona for themselves in order to pedal their wares to the highest bidder. As Watson wryly commented, “Pear’s Soap and Bovril spent millions for an international fame which did not compare in extent with the publicity which that genius of advertising, Whistler, gained through a monocle and a lock of hair.”²⁵⁰

In seeking to create a more expansive role for art in society and by offering the artist “a steady job” Watson maintained that there was nothing government could have done to “more radically transform the relation of a single class of individuals to each other, to the outer world, and, more important still, to their own work.”²⁵¹ The New Deal was giving artists the opportunity to take their place as “citizens” — to “work and live like decent, self-reliant artisans, rather than as prima donnas.”²⁵² While much of the ideological import of Watson’s position marks an enlightened change in the role of government, at certain points his “cooperative workers” sound a little too much like the “docile citizens” indoctrinated within a totalitarian regime.²⁵³ Furthermore, a conflict existed between the two different philosophies towards awarding commissions from the outset, with the central contradiction being between Hopkin’s desire to provide relief to unemployed artists and Bruce and Watson’s requirement for quality.

Whereas Hopkins dealt with artists like any other unemployed worker who required a living wage to survive, regardless of their artistic abilities, Bruce and Watson only

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

²⁴⁸ Burck, “Sectarianism in Art,” p. 27.

²⁴⁹ Watson, “The Artist Becomes a Citizen,” p. 278.

²⁵⁰ Watson, “The Chance in a Thousand,” *MA* 28.8 (August 1935), p. 471.

²⁵¹ Watson, “A Steady Job,” *MA* 27.4 (April 1934), p. 168.

²⁵² Watson, “The Artist Becomes a Citizen,” p. 279.

²⁵³ Watson, “The Public Works of Art Project,” p. 29.

wanted to employ artists with proven abilities and established reputations. As Bruce stated in a public address delivered in January 1934: "There has been too much said about this project as being a relief measure. It is not a relief measure . . . the prime test in selecting artists for this work is their qualification and ability as artists I can assure you that these pay rolls contain the names of a large body of the leading painters and sculptors of this country."²⁵⁴ While it was also agreed that artists should work in conditions of creative freedom, they were required to submit a portfolio of work to the Regional Committee before they could be added to the rolls and preliminary sketches and designs were submitted for approval before they could be executed. The contradictions inherent in these initial viewpoints were never resolved within the PWAP, and just as the project served as a prototype for the art projects that would follow, this conflict was germane to the development of subsequent New Deal programmes.²⁵⁵

The CPUSA and the New Deal

In order to understand the particular constellation of opportunities and problems the New Deal art initiatives posed for artists on the left, it is necessary to look at Communist attitudes toward both the state and the projects. The key issue for those on the left was that while the projects provided real and much-needed relief for destitute artists the Party was deeply opposed to Roosevelt during the early years of the New Deal. Three months after the President took office a scathing critique of the New Deal appeared in *New Masses* that characterized Roosevelt as a "scion of the Hudson River aristocracy in the role of St. George slaying the dragon of depression, [whose] once shining halo is seen to be tilted at a precarious angle and more than a little tarnished;" so much for the "hope and promised charity of pre-election propaganda and post-

²⁵⁴ [Address of Bruce], PWAP, 17 January 1934.

²⁵⁵ This commitment to quality later informed the Section of Painting and Sculpture, also supervised by Bruce. The money for the Section came directly from the Treasury Department and unlike all subsequent projects, the Section prided itself on *not* being a relief programme. Its artists were selected in juried competitions and it employed painters and sculptors of high repute, many of whom already enjoyed relatively comfortable incomes. On the Section see Carter, "Figuring the New Deal: Politics and Ideology in Treasury Section Painting and Sculpture in Washington, D.C., 1934-1943," PhD thesis, University College London, 2007; Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation*, pp. 51-56; 101-131; and McKinzie, *The New Deal*, pp. 35-50.

election ballyhoo of returning prosperity.”²⁵⁶ While the Party’s critical stance in relation to the New Deal would soon have to be rethought under the mounting pressure of international developments and the shift toward the Popular Front by 1935, Communists consistently underestimated the progressiveness of New Deal measures during the early part of the decade.²⁵⁷

Charting the changing relationship between the CPUSA and the New Deal, Anders Stephanson observes that because the Party was never compelled to produce a sophisticated theory of the state, one of the results was that subsequent conceptualizations of the New Deal “suffered commensurately.”²⁵⁸ Offering a crude and inadequate analysis, the Party viewed the New Deal administration as the willing tool of capital, albeit cloaked in a smokescreen of empty promises. They saw little difference between Roosevelt and his predecessor Hoover, contending that the only thing that distinguished the President from his opponents on the right was tactics rather than ultimate objectives. As Earl Browder stressed in the pages of *New Masses*, the New Deal “merely gives a new form to the Old Deal policies.”

It chokes and disintegrates for a time the mass revolt against the Old Deal, while achieving the same aims at the price of deliberately abandoning a clear posing of issues, cultivating hypocrisy as a system, shrouding economic and political policies in a fog of mysticism — and sharply intensifying, even while postponing some issues, the fundamental struggle of contradictions inherent in capitalism which gave birth to the crisis.²⁵⁹

According to Browder’s analysis, the Democrats and the Republicans were both merely intent upon patching-up a compromised capitalist system. But of course regardless of Roosevelt’s willingness to embrace progressive strategies, the Party did not want reform; they were committed to revolution. Indeed, in their efforts to

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁷ My discussion of the CPUSA’s attitude toward the New Deal state draws heavily upon Fraser Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States from the Depression to World War II* (London: Rutgers University Press, 1991), pp. 65-75. see also Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

²⁵⁸ Anders Stephanson, “The CPUSA Conception of the Rooseveltian State, 1933-1939,” *Radical History Review* 24 (Fall 1980), p. 162.

²⁵⁹ Browder, *Communism in the United States*, p. 10.

stabilize and regulate the economy, the architects of the New Deal were content to leave industrial and corporate capitalism intact. Moreover, given that the achievement of social harmony was equated with national unity rather than class struggle, Roosevelt's statist priorities and interventionist stance were interpreted by the Party as incipient fascism, with comparisons being made in the Communist press between FDR's policies and those of Hitler and Mussolini.²⁶⁰

Anxiety about homegrown fascism was not limited to Communists. Although, for the most part, liberals responded favourably to Roosevelt's first Hundred Days in office, the worsening political climate abroad meant that writers greeted widespread state intervention with ambivalence. As Pells observes, even liberals "were never certain whether they were witnessing the birth of a planned society or the creation of a corporate state bearing an uncomfortable resemblance to Italy and Germany."²⁶¹ The Democrats's desire to "reform" and "regulate" capitalism (by, for example, assuming federal control of production and prices and by establishing a public works programme) could be interpreted as an ominous harbinger of what lay ahead. As James Burnham warned in the little magazine *Symposium* in 1933, "The illusory belief that the state is autonomous, independent of classes, and therefore able to balance their claims, which is Roosevelt's belief, is fundamental to fascism."²⁶² For the CPUSA, however, there was no room for equivocation. The Comintern had already posited the catastrophic crisis of capitalism. As far as the Party was concerned such crisis could only end in socialist revolution or fascism, and America was moving towards the latter. As Browder concluded in August 1933, the federal government's increasing role in the economy and its cooperation with business made the New Deal "the American brother of Mussolini's 'corporate state.'"²⁶³ The reform measures and legislative initiatives undertaken by the New Deal were merely a desperate attempt to gain some much-needed time for capitalist forces intent on saving the system.

²⁶⁰ See David Ramsey, "A New Deal in Trusts," *NM* 10 (9 January 1934), p.17 and Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Three New Deals: Reflections on Roosevelt's America, Mussolini's Italy, and Hitler's Germany, 1933-1939* (New York: Picador, 2007).

²⁶¹ Pells, *Radical Visions*, p. 81.

²⁶² James Burnham, "Comment," *Symposium* 4 (July 1933), p. 277.

²⁶³ Browder as cited in Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States*, p. 69.

Furthermore, despite the Party's scathing attacks on the National Industrial Recovery Act for its labour policy, the President was becoming increasingly popular among workers and this did nothing to lessen the Party's antagonism.²⁶⁴

In assessing the stance of the CPUSA in relation to the New Deal it is important to bear in mind that Party attitudes were, to a great extent, shaped and dictated by the Comintern. Decisive policies were formulated in Moscow and, in theory if not in practice, followed a "strict downward hierarchy."²⁶⁵ Forced to take their cues from the Comintern, which was vehemently opposed to Roosevelt, no other American political party was so dependent upon the actions of a foreign organization. The problem of implementing general Party policy in the US caused considerable internal controversy and debate because, as Stephanson observes, "the Comintern, presumably the embodiment of Marxist science, had very little to say about the greatest capitalist power extant, thus leaving considerable room for local speculation."²⁶⁶ The CPUSA's response to the New Deal was thus frequently rendered rudimentary and unrefined and remained unchanged until the transition to the Popular Front, despite the evolution of Roosevelt's policies and, with time, the fierce opposition they generated from the right, in particular from the Liberty League and the Hearst Press. My point here is that the Party's opposition to Roosevelt and its characterization of the New Deal as "the official fascization of government" during the early 1930s meant that support for, and participation in, the PWAP were rendered somewhat problematic for artists on the left.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁴ Although clause 7a of the Act seemed to offer state endorsement of union activity and catalyzed a huge spike in membership that was accompanied by the great wave of strikes for union recognition in 1933-1934, the Party saw Roosevelt's labour provisions as nothing more than leftist demagoguery concealing the New Deal's defense of the interests of industry and finance capital; see Milton, *The Politics of U.S. Labor*, pp. 38-63; and Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism: The Conflict that Shaped American Unions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 43-90.

²⁶⁵ Stephanson, "The CPUSA Conception of the Rooseveltian State," p. 162.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁷ This characterization of the New Deal was consistently deployed in the *Daily Worker* in 1934; see Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States*, note 76, p. 239. On Communists and fellow-travellers working on the PWAP see Hemingway, *Artist on the Left*, pp. 88-100.

Although a number of Communist and fellow-travelling artists worked on the project, state patronage was reviled in the Communist press as an attempt to win over cultural workers with “pitifully small hand-outs from the Federal Treasury.” In May 1935, a year after the PWAP was closed down, Alexander offered an evaluation of the project, focusing his assessment on muralism. As a result of their decidedly public character murals were not burdened with the bourgeois associations of easel paintings and could therefore serve as vehicles for the dissemination of social ideas. In principle then, the production of murals should have provided leftists with a significant forum to communicate their ideas to a broad and varied audience. Alexander insisted, however, that this was not the case, and even the mural had been “perverted” under the New Deal administration.²⁶⁸ This resulted from the fact that within the PWAP “the capitalist class exercises a censorship which is all the more effective because it operates under the cover of ‘free choice.’”²⁶⁹ Even though artists “were in most instances told to choose their own subject . . . [they] know how much chance an artist has of doing a painting of even faintly-revolutionary meaning.”²⁷⁰ While the notion of working on the project in complete freedom from constraints was facile to say the least, he concluded his tirade by citing two instances that occurred in the spring of 1934, just as the PWAP was wrapping up its activities, and which proved his point rather well: Paul Cadmus’s *The Fleets’ In* (1934) (fig. 25), a “politically innocent portrayal” of some sailors “on shore leave” which, due to its sexual content, was censured as “slandorous” and excluded from the PWAP national exhibition; and the destruction of Rivera’s mural in Rockefeller Center.

Moreover if, as New Deal cultural ideologues such as Bruce and Watson never tired of repeating, art produced under the PWAP was meant to reflect and engage with American life, and to bring artists “in touch and in line with the life of the nation,” what exactly did this mean for artists whose political ambitions were international by statute and definition?²⁷¹ Unsurprisingly, Communists and fellow-travellers were

²⁶⁸ Editorial, *NM* 10.1 (2 January 1934), p. 4.; Alexander, “Mural Painting,” p. 28.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁷¹ Bruce, “Implications of the Public Works of Art Project,” p. 113.

extremely critical of the project's pronounced nationalist concern with identifying native traditions. Given their belief that all forms of nationalism were consonant with fascist ideology, such "frantic patrioteering in the cultural field" merely confirmed the Party's convictions that the New Deal state was incipiently fascistic.²⁷² As Alexander observed in *New Masses*, "Today this national chauvinism, 100 percentism, is strongly entrenched and gaining rapidly."²⁷³ Even some mainstream critics regarded the mounting preoccupation with "100 percentism" with caution, warning against the current trend in the art world to "wrap our art in the flag and, like savages, perform about it an orgiastic fetish dance."²⁷⁴ But if, as Alexander alleged, the PWAP effectively suppressed the expression of revolutionary ideas and dictated the content of art "through subtle capitalist censorship," then did the same hold true in relation to formal issues?²⁷⁵ Given his damning denunciation of federal patronage, what did this mean for artists with leftist political sympathies and a commitment to modernist aesthetics?

Modernism for the Masses

While it is something of a truism that modernism (and here I mean the School of Paris variant) was seen by many during the 1930s as a social and artistic phenomenon that was at once visually unpalatable and politically incomprehensible, there were a number of artists within the New York art milieu who thought otherwise. The Regional Committee was under the chairpersonship of Juliana Force, director of the Whitney, and committee members included Goodrich and Barr. Nearly one thousand artists were on the New York State rolls, with some 800 in New York City alone, and a surprising number of them were modernists.²⁷⁶ In terms of easel painting, commissions were completed by Ilya Bolotowsky, Byron Browne, Francis Criss, Burgoyne Diller, John Graham, Harry Holtzman, Jan Matulka, and Louis Schanker.²⁷⁷

²⁷² Alexander, "White Haired Boy of the Crisis," *NM* 15.6 (7 May 1935), p. 28.

²⁷³ Alexander, "Revolutionary Front," pp. 28-29.

²⁷⁴ Jewell, "The Place of the Artist in the Community," *Parnassus* 6.4 (April 1934), p. 4.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁶ Watson, "Art and the Government in 1934," *Parnassus* 7.1 (January 1935), p. 15.

²⁷⁷ These artists are discussed in Lane and Larsen's *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America* and Mecklenburg's *The Patricia and Phillip Frost Collection*.

Among them, Bolotowsky, Browne, Criss, Graham, and Matulka can be characterized as leftists and their works manifest a variety of modernist aesthetic strategies.

Graham's turbulent *Landscape on Lake George* (fig. 26) is characterized by an expressionistic treatment of form.²⁷⁸ His style, in which heavy impasto alternates with smooth planes, would tend more toward Surrealism as the decade unfolded and he synthesized his own idiosyncratic blend of Marxist politics and modernist theory. According to Graham, Surrealism was deemed to be "truly revolutionary" in that it "teaches the unconscious mind — by means of transposition — revolutionary methods, thus providing the conscious mind itself with material necessary for arriving at revolutionary conclusions."²⁷⁹ His gestural handling of shape and colour in paintings is similar to the brushy surface of Bolotowsky's *In a Barbershop* (fig. 27), where a group of ethnically diverse characters are presented from a bird's-eye view.²⁸⁰ Bolotowsky was born in Russia and settled in New York in 1923.²⁸¹ He studied at the National Academy from 1924 to 1930 and was an active member in both the Artists' Union and the Artists' Congress. During the early 1930s he was aligned with the Expressionist movement and was later part of The Ten when it was established in 1935.²⁸² Bolotowsky's other two oils *A Factory Interior* and *A View From the Woolworth Building*, while depicting images of life in urban America, failed to impress the Regional Committee, which tersely noted in April that he "might be given [an] unimportant landscape to do."²⁸³

²⁷⁸ PWAP documentation also acknowledges receipt of eight sketches for a mural entitled *Equestrian Epic*, with the further notation "Washington discard."

²⁷⁹ John Graham, "Eight Modes of Painting," *AF* 1.2 (January 1935), pp. 6-7. Graham's writings on this particular amalgam of Marxist theory and modernist aesthetics are annotated and given a critical introduction in Marcia Epstein Allentuck, *John Graham's System and Dialectics of Art* (1937; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971).

²⁸⁰ Bolotowsky offers this description of the painting in his Project Card, 8 March 1934, PWAP, Record Group (RG) 121, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, Maryland (also New York office). All subsequent references to PWAP Project Cards and Progress Reports are included in the same Record Group, as is all correspondence regarding PWAP commissions.

²⁸¹ On Bolotowsky see his "On Neoplasticism and My Own Work: A Memoir," *Leonardo* 2.3 (July 1969), pp. 221-230 and the Guggenheim's *Ilya Bolotowsky*.

²⁸² On Expressionism and The Ten see Herbert Lawrence, "The Ten," *AF* 2.3 (February 1936), p. 12; Jacob Kainen, "Our Expressionists," *AF* 3.1 (February 1937), pp. 14-15; Lucy Embick, "The Expressionist Current in New York's Avant-Garde, 1935-1940," *Rutger's Art Review* 5 (Spring 1984), pp. 56-69; and Isabelle Dervaux, "The Ten," *AAAJ* 31.2 (1991), pp. 14-20.

²⁸³ Undated, unsigned typewritten note accompanying Bolotowsky's Project Card.

In contrast to the more sensuous facture characterizing the paintings of Graham and Bolotowsky, Criss's *City Store Fronts* (fig. 28) and *Cityscape* (fig. 29) are indebted to Cubism for their flattened perspective and strong juxtapositions of vertical and horizontal planes.²⁸⁴ Criss was born in London, but immigrated to Philadelphia, where he studied at the Academy of Fine Arts and the Barnes Foundation. Following a trip to Europe in 1920 he moved to New York in 1926, beginning classes at the Arts Student League under Matulka shortly thereafter. During the 1930s he was active in the Union and was a charter member of the Congress and An American Group, Inc., which was established in 1931 to address the problems younger artists faced in finding venues to exhibit their works and which stood for an "esthetic united front."²⁸⁵ Further attesting to his leftist credentials, he took up a teaching post in the spring of 1936 at the new JRC School of Art, which had been symptomatically renamed the American Artists School. Criss was hired onto the project in December 1933 and immediately expressed interest in "a mural project using [the] New York City landscape."²⁸⁶ While never executing a mural under the PWAP, his *Cityscape* is of interest in that it potentially offers a note of social commentary. Wet within his urban milieu, and flanked by modest buildings either "for sale" or "for rent," sits a monumental bank with the word "Trust" emblazoned across its façade. The painting makes a subtle but pointed reference to the impotence of capital to stem the effects of the Depression on the lower classes and to Communist criticism of Roosevelt's "trustification" of the New Deal.²⁸⁷ Matulka executed paintings such as *Still Life Composition* (fig. 30), with its raking perspective and prominently displayed copy of *The Arts* (whose contents included a review of his 1930 exhibition at the Rehn Gallery in New York). He was a committed modernist and was keen to engage in a mural project.²⁸⁸ Born in Czechoslovakia, he emigrated to New York in 1907, where he immediately enrolled at the National Academy of Design and later took classes at the Art Students League, where he became an influential instructor at the end of the 1920s. He was one of the first of his

²⁸⁴ See the Corcoran Gallery's *Restructured Reality: The 1930s Paintings of Francis Criss*.

²⁸⁵ For an overview of An American Group's activities see Ernest Brace, "An American Group, Inc.," *MA* 31.5 (May 1938), pp. 271-275; and Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, pp. 133-136.

²⁸⁶ Criss, Project Card, 28 December 1933.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*; Ramsey, "A New Deal in Trusts," p. 17.

²⁸⁸ Matulka, Project Card, undated. See the Smithsonian's *Jan Matulka, 1890-1972* and the Montclair Art Museum's *Jan Matulka: The Global Modernist*.

generation to embark for Paris, making his initial trip during the winter of 1919-1920. He subsequently divided his time between the two cities throughout the twenties. By the 1930s he had already created abstract works grounded in Cubist techniques and maintained an abiding interest in Picasso. But as his PWAP paintings demonstrate, he continued to work with equal ease in a more conventional figurative idiom. Unlike other modernists on the project (with the obvious exception of Davis), Matulka had a far more substantial involvement with Communists and fellow-travellers. Between 1926 and 1930 he contributed twenty-four illustrations to *New Masses* and had been among those artists included in the first exhibition of the JRC in December 1929.

Two of the mural commissions (while never executed) awarded to modernists were given to Davis and Gorky. Upon his return from Paris in 1929 Davis was introduced to Gorky through their mutual friend Graham.²⁸⁹ Gorky was hired onto the project on 20 December 1933 and Davis was added to the rolls eight days later. Davis had written to Force during the first week of the project's operation to inquire about employment, but he missed his first appointment with the New York Committee. He had no address in New York and was staying in Gloucester, Massachusetts, where he spent time every year from 1915 to 1934 and whose topography was a recurring theme in his art.²⁹⁰ Upon receiving his notification he immediately returned to the city in the hopes of securing a commission and he remained on the project until 28 April 1934.²⁹¹

One of three oils that Davis executed on the project, *Analogical Emblem — American Waterfront* (fig. 31) is insistently materialist in its facture and is characterized by the artist's workman-like application of paint, a dazzling palette, and a Cubist organization of space.²⁹² The work brings together a series of fragments that are culled from common experience "for their intrinsic visual interest," which are then "studied

²⁸⁹ Davis, "Arshile Gorky in the 1930s: A Personal Recollection," *MA* 44 (February 1951), pp. 56-58; reprinted in Kelder, *Stuart Davis*, pp. 178-183.

²⁹⁰ Davis to Force, PWAP, 13 December 1933.

²⁹¹ Davis to New York Regional Committee, PWAP, 19 December 1933.

²⁹² The final disposition under the PWAP was noted as James Monroe High School, New York. The other two oils are *Two Men Look at a Future* (alternate title *Men and Machine*, now owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art) and *Contemporary Street Scene* (whereabouts unknown), whose final dispositions were noted as New York University, College of Fine Arts and James Madison High School, Brooklyn. There are no records to indicate that these works ever reached their intended destinations.

from Nature and composed in a single unit.”²⁹³ Engaging the American Scene from a perspective quite unlike that of the “domestic naturalists” and synthesizing a native aesthetic with the lessons of European modernism, Davis created what Lane has appropriately labelled “vernacular Cubism.”²⁹⁴ *Analogical Emblem* is largely taken up with a schematized depiction of a ship’s rigging. Superimposed over and within the rigging are a cigar-shaped object encircled by a rope, a pair of oranges, a line drawing of a bejeweled woman sporting a flower, a ladder, and a strange element which appears to have a mouthful of vicious teeth. These fragments, a number of which would subsequently be re-incorporated into Davis’s *Swing Landscape* (a mural he executed for the FAP in 1938), are treated in a bold, linear way and are montaged across the surface of the support without any concern for relative size or scale.

While each element in *Analogical Emblem* originates with something observed in nature, as Davis’s title suggests the relationship between art and nature is *analogous* rather than mimetic, with the pictorial version transforming its referent into a highly conventionalized sign. As Davis wrote in his notes, his treatment of subject matter was “not imitative or realistic but analogical, that is to say it has similarity without identity to its subject. It is a memorandum in visual shorthand.”²⁹⁵ Later clarifying what he meant in “The Cube Root,” an article he wrote for *Art News* in 1943, he explained that “In one way or another the quality of these things plays a role in determining the character of my paintings. Not in the sense of describing them in graphic images, but by predetermining an analogous dynamics in the design, which becomes part of the new American environment.”²⁹⁶ As the title Davis gave his PWAP mural study further suggests, the elements juxtaposed in his paintings serve as *emblems* for things existing in the world, with the pictorial version standing in for or *representing* its counterpart.

In seeking to transform the world into an aggregation of schematized and fragmented signs, Davis’s invocation of the emblematic corresponds in some respects with Walter

²⁹³ Davis, Progress Report, 17 February 1934; and 28 March 1934.

²⁹⁴ Lane and Larsen, *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America*, p. 10.

²⁹⁵ Davis papers, undated note [1933?].

²⁹⁶ Davis, “The Cube Root,” *Art News* (1 February 1943), p. 35.

Benjamin's understanding of the emblem, namely as "a montage of visual image and linguistic sign, out of which is read, like a picture puzzle, what things 'mean.'" ²⁹⁷ And here is where Davis's insistence on the realism of his work is accorded cognitive purchase. By de-naturalizing, or as Jakobson puts it, "deforming" the pictorial sign, he refuses to present the viewer with a reflection of reality that confirms the current order of things and which can be passively consumed. ²⁹⁸ Rather, visual fragmentation is accompanied by conceptual disjunction such that the viewer, in taking up the invitation to de-code the painting and its alternative vision of reality, becomes an active participant in the construction of the work's affect and meaning. Significantly, Davis seems to have recognized the ways in which analogy and emblemization may be deployed for the purpose of explanation or clarification. In his project card he noted that while the mural was appropriate for any wall from a technical standpoint, it was "most suited to a school as an educational visual example which teaches a fresh and direct vision of commonplace objects." ²⁹⁹

Throughout the 1930s Davis was committed to creating a modern mural art that was democratic in terms of access. He also extended the notion of democracy to include formal issues. As his old friend Elliot Paul (a founder of the experimental magazine *transition*) already stressed in 1928, Davis's work "is no more haphazard than a Bach fugue" and the artist offered a concise analysis of his approach to space and composition in socio-political terms. ³⁰⁰ Working with the notion that picture-making is, as Michael Baxandall has since persuasively distilled it, "a deposit of a social relationship," and one where a whole range of cultural conventions are brought to bear on perceptual and pictorial conventions, Davis linked the emergence of modern art to

²⁹⁷ Walter Benjamin discusses the emblem in *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (1928; London: Verso, 1998); see also Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 160-165.

²⁹⁸ Jakobson, "On Realism in Art," p. 40.

²⁹⁹ Davis, Progress Report, 17 January 1934. Most of the PWAP works completed by modernists were hung in local high schools and public libraries, with only a handful ending up in the collection of museums.

³⁰⁰ Elliot Paul, "Stuart Davis, American Painter," *transition* 14 (1928), pp. 146-148. As Sims notes, Paul arranged for Davis to visit Léger's studio while he was in Paris; see Sims, *American Painter*, p. 54.

the world in which it developed.³⁰¹ He suggested that discoveries in the scientific analysis of colour, synthetic chemistry, physics, photography, and electric light were given visual form in “the democratic dots of Seurat” and “the democratic dashes of Van Gogh.”³⁰² With the subsequent development of Cubism and the move to abstraction, the process of isolating discrete elements and then reconfiguring them across the surface of the support enabled the creation of a more egalitarian composition, one where “the resultant autonomy of parts corresponds to the freedom of the individual under a democratic government.”³⁰³ “This fact,” he continued, was “especially easy to see if the modern works are contrasted with works of previous centuries, where the formal conception is hierarchically concentric with a center corresponding to monarchical authority and to a science of eternal categories.”³⁰⁴

Clearly recognizing that pictorial conventions were culturally specific and ideologically-engaged, he further suggested that the rejection of perspectival space could be construed as a refusal of a particular world view, one that was contingent upon the stasis of hierarchical organization. In place of what Erwin Panofsky had already described in the 1920s as the “infinite, unchanging and homogeneous” space defined by linear perspective, modernist pictorial space was, according to Davis, characterized by “extensive spatial fields of equality.”³⁰⁵ Making a further assertion that would support the realism of his work, he argued that in place of the “ideal” relations of perspectival space, the spatial configurations of modernism were “not replicas of some already existing systems;” instead, they were new systems that were “unique and absolute but are at the same time in harmony with, referable, and relative to the contemporary environment.”³⁰⁶ As is evident, Davis was not just critiquing traditional approaches to picture-making, he was rejecting what Martin Jay terms an

³⁰¹ Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Florence*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 1.

³⁰² Davis, “Abstract Painting Today,” p. 127.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁵ Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher Wood (1927; New York: Zone Books, 1997), pp. 28-29. On the cultural contingency of perspectival space, especially in relation to Panofsky, see Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), pp. 3-20. Davis, “Abstract Painting Today,” p. 127.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

entire “scopic regime” and was targeting these conventions for their privileging of, in the words of Jay, “an ahistorical, disinterested, disembodied subject entirely outside of the world it claims to know only from afar.”³⁰⁷ For Davis then, the New Deal emphasis on the democratization of culture meant more than merely increased access for the masses. Such democratization was realized through modernism’s formal armature. As he claimed in his PWAP project card: “The political analysis is Democracy, in that figures and objects are assumed to have equal importance as the organization of the design, whether they be of great or small importance in a social scene.”³⁰⁸

Gorky also combined a series of disparate fragments in his mural study for the PWAP, which he suggested would be well-suited to the “Port of New York Authority,” the “Entrance to Museum of Peaceful Arts,” or a “News Building . . . in mashinery dept. [sic].”³⁰⁹ Laconically entitled *1934* (figs 32 and 33) his pen and ink sketches fuse elements from his *Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia* series (fig. 34), on which he had been engaged for several years and which owes clear formal debts to Arp, Miró, and Masson.³¹⁰ The studies combine a diversity of abstract, surrealist and figurative elements in a horizontal format superimposed onto the compositional structure of Paolo Uccello’s *Profanation of the Host* (c.1467-1468) (fig. 35), a reproduction of which was pinned onto his studio wall.³¹¹ Inserting biomorphic forms within a compartmentalized Cubist spatial structure, Gorky abandoned the narrative content of Uccello’s predella while maintaining the checkered floor and central column that firmly anchor the fractured composition. The fact that Gorky’s work of the 1930s was

³⁰⁷ Martin Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity” in Hal Foster, ed., *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), p. 10.

³⁰⁸ Davis, Project Card, 26 December 1933; Progress Report, 7 March 1934.

³⁰⁹ Gorky was born Vosdanik Manuk Adoian and committed suicide in 1948. His brief and tragic life has spawned a number of biographies; see Hayden Herrera, *Arshile Gorky: His Life and Work* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003); Matthew Spender, *From a High Place: A Life of Arshile Gorky* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); and Nouritza Matossian, *Black Angel: A Life of Arshile Gorky* (London: Pimlico, 2001). The locations for his mural study were suggested in a Progress Report, 17 January 1934.

³¹⁰ As Spender points out, works in the *Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia* were inspired by a mural executed by Masson for Gaston David-Weill, which Gorky had seen in reproduction; Spender, *From a High Place*, p. 88.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

clearly indebted to European painting (by turns the works of Cézanne and Picasso or Uccello and Ingres) was, as Davis later recalled, “apparent to everybody, and there was a tendency to criticize him as a naïve imitator.”³¹² Yet while Davis defended Gorky against the critics on the basis that the work of “these carpers . . . was so loaded with bad interpretations and imitation that they were the last ones who had a right to speak,” I very much like Meyer Schapiro’s notion that while Gorky was producing obviously derived pictures, what seemed like a prolonged period of “servile imitation” was actually what might be regarded as “a voluntary and humble discipleship.”³¹³

In a project card written two days after applying to the PWAP, Gorky described 1934 as follows:

My subject matter is directional. American plains are horizontal. New York City which I live in is vertical. In the middle of my picture stands a column which symbolizes the determination of the American nation. Various abstract scenes take place in the back of this column. My intention is to create objectivity of the articles which I have detached from their habitual surroundings to be able to give them the highest realism.³¹⁴

Gorky’s reference to “the determination of the American nation” should perhaps be understood as an attempt to link his work to the continuing economic crisis and also as a means of appeasing project officials who tended to prefer material that dealt with some aspect of the American scene. Given that he was submitting a decidedly modernist work, his invocation of “realism” may be framed by similar concerns. However, the positioning of modernism *as* realism, a stance similarly espoused by Davis, was one that Gorky would subscribe to throughout the decade and which, beyond merely enabling connections with the dominant realist aesthetic, had broader formal and political resonance for both artists, a notion which will be developed in subsequent chapters.³¹⁵

³¹² Davis, “Arshile Gorky,” p. 181.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 181-182; Meyer Schapiro, “Arshile Gorky” (1957), *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), pp. 179-180.

³¹⁴ Gorky, Project Card, 22 December 1933.

³¹⁵ Gorky’s employment was terminated 29 April 1934 and he does not seem to have transferred to the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration’s payroll to complete his project.

Although Davis and Gorky would both conceive of modernism as a species of realism throughout the 1930s, and while they were close friends during the early years of the decade, with Gorky celebrating Davis as a “pioneer” of American painting, their priorities soon diverged.³¹⁶ As the economic situation worsened Davis began to devote the majority of his time to organizational activities, which Gorky regarded with skepticism. For while Gorky participated in some of the collective activities of the decade, I want to argue that his commitment to the left was different from Davis’s in degree, but not necessarily in kind, and he did not want to collapse the spheres of art and politics. Indeed, on one occasion when artists gathered together to discuss what sort of paintings would best accommodate the working class, Gorky quipped “Why don’t you just teach them how to shoot?”³¹⁷ The revolution was one thing, art was another, and surely the former would provide greater freedom of expression for artists not less. His frustration with those who failed to see the difference was clear when he stormed out after a disagreement with the executive board of the Artists’ Union shouting “There are artists and there are organizers!”³¹⁸ Davis interpreted Gorky’s stance as irresponsible and he was unable to countenance this apparent lack of political commitment. Davis lamented that “Gorky was less intense about it and still wanted to play” (by which he meant work in the studio) and according to Davis, their “friendship terminated and was never resumed.”³¹⁹

By mid-decade Davis very much prioritized collective activism over his own art practice and his involvement with both liberal and leftist circles during the period made him well-suited for his prominent role in organizing artists. He was a member of the JRC and was elected President of the Artists’ Union in 1934 (when it superseded the Unemployed Artists’ Group).³²⁰ Not only was he the leading spokesperson for the

³¹⁶ Gorky, “Stuart Davis,” *CA* 9 (September 1931), p. 213; reprinted in Kelder, *Stuart Davis*, pp. 192-194.

³¹⁷ This comment was relayed by Dorothy Dehner to Garnett McCoy in 1966 and is quoted in Spender, *From a High Place*, p. 129.

³¹⁸ See Monroe, “The 30s,” note 11, p. 67.

³¹⁹ Davis, “Arshile Gorky,” pp. 182-183.

³²⁰ On the Artists’ Union and *Art Front* see Monroe, “The Artists Union of New York,” PhD thesis, New York University, 1977. Research for Monroe’s thesis led to the publication of a number of useful

Union, but from January to November 1935 he assumed the editorship of its journal *Art Front* (which published its first issue in November 1934 and ran until 1937). Although the Union stated in its constitution that the group was a “non-political, non-sectarian mass organization of artists,” the journal was closely aligned with the position of the CPUSA and provided an important forum for leftist artists to debate their views.³²¹ Furthermore, in contradistinction to *New Masses*, it fostered far more candid exchanges around the value of modernism, thereby providing Davis with an ideal platform to promulgate his ideas on art.

As Davis’s regular contributions to *Art Front* attest, he was deeply committed to securing jobs, ensuring fair wages and flexible working conditions, and lobbying against dismissals for the Union’s membership, which had surpassed 700 by the autumn of 1934 and more than doubled the following year. But while he was a staunch advocate of a federally-funded public art programme, his position during the early 1930s was consonant with the stance taken by the CPUSA in their appraisal of the New Deal and its cultural projects. Like the Party, he viewed state-sponsored art in its current form as merely a capitalist concession extended in a time of economic crisis and he felt that provisions under the PWAP were inadequate. He also took serious issue with patrician notions of “quality” and assumptions about who possessed the authority to judge what constituted “good art.” Such judgments, as Davis contended, were class-based, and they pervaded both the PWAP and, later, the Treasury Section. His battle with the administration would come to a head in 1935 over the running of the Section.³²²

articles on the topic, including “Artists as Militant Trade Union Workers During the Great Depression,” *AAAJ* 14.1 (1974), pp. 7-10; and “Artists on the Barricades: The Militant Artists’ Union Treats with the New Deal,” *AAAJ* 18.3 (1978), pp. 20-23. See also Francine Tyler, “Artists Respond to the Great Depression and the Threat of Fascism: The New York Artists’ Union and its Magazine *Art Front* (1934-1937),” PhD thesis, New York University, 1991 and Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, which deals with the activities of the Union throughout.

³²¹ Constitution of the Artists’ Union as cited in Monroe, “The 30s,” p. 66.

³²² Both the Section and the Treasury Relief Art Project (1935-1938) were sharply criticized by artists for their elitist policies. For example, in response to Watson’s “The Chance in a Thousand,” Davis’s “Some Chance!” *AF* 1.7 (November 1935), p. 4 critiqued his patrician assumptions about “quality” and “expert authority.” See also “Watson vs. Artists,” *AF* 1.8 (December 1935), p. 2.

Once the PWAP was underway, the Union directed its energies toward the running of the project, with particular attention focused on the activities of Juliana Force, whose appointment as head of the Regional Committee was greeted by both modern and academic painters with disappointment. Many artists feared that Force would give preferential treatment to artists already associated with the Whitney or, worse still, prioritize “quality” over “relief” and thus hire individuals who did not need economic assistance. In many instances, their suspicions were borne out, as the example of modernist Browne demonstrates. Despite his personal appeals to Force he was continually sidelined on the project.³²³ While on 12 January 1934 he was given the go-ahead for an easel painting entitled *Music*, which he described as a figure painting that would be “suitable as a mural for a library, carried out in a more abstract than realistic manner,” he subsequently received a letter on 9 February terminating his employment, effective the following day.³²⁴ Although by this point the PWAP did have to curtail spending, Browne suspected that he was taken off the rolls because he was a modernist and, as he described it, his “work contain[ed] little or no emphasis on subject matter.”³²⁵ This seems unlikely, however, as three weeks later Force offered fellow modernists Bolotowsky, Criss, Davis, Diller, Gorky, Graham and Matulka additional commissions, with the only stipulations being that they reduced the size of their paintings and did not “undertake work which [would] require a long time to complete.”³²⁶ In Browne’s case the issue was thus not with his modernist style per se, as he assumed, and his termination may have resulted from Force’s evaluation of his artistic competence more generally.

Given her blatant unfairness it is not surprising that Force became known as “Mrs. Farce” among artists.³²⁷ In a further testament to her favouritism, her decision to hire Criss was made following a letter received from one Mr. Stanley Lotharp who, it

³²³ Browne to Force, undated letter. On Browne see April Paul, “Byron Browne in the Thirties: The Battle for Abstract Art,” *AAAJ* 19.4 (1979), pp. 9-24.

³²⁴ Browne, Project Card, 12 January 1934; New York Regional Committee to Browne, PWAP, 9 February 1934.

³²⁵ Browne to New York Regional Committee, PWAP, undated letter [but sometime before June 1934].

³²⁶ The same criteria were given to all artists; see, for example, New York Regional Committee to Bolotowsky, PWAP, 26 March 1934.

³²⁷ Monroe, “The Artists’ Union of New York,” p. 46.

seems, “enjoyed tremendously” the evening they spent together, and who took the opportunity of returning her cigarette case to put in a good word for Criss, whose work he deemed sufficiently “worthwhile.”³²⁸ The letter was dated 26 December and Criss was hired two days later.³²⁹ In response to such unjust practices the Union organized a number of highly publicized demonstrations in front of the museum between January and March 1934, which led to the Whitney closing six weeks before the end of the season, presumably out of Force’s fears of vandalism.³³⁰ Several years later, when the FAP was winding down in 1941, Force issued the criticism that the project produced “too much mediocre art Selectivity is the essence of art and there can be no true selectivity when the basic reason for choosing an artist is his poverty” — a statement which unequivocally confirmed her position in the debate over quality versus relief.³³¹

The Project Meets Its Public

In January 1934 Lawrence Robert (Assistant Secretary to the Treasury) asked Bruce to organize a national exhibition of PWAP artworks to be displayed in the spring as the showpiece of the project’s efforts. Bruce instantly recognized the gravity of the event. The endeavour was a litmus test of public opinion and continued federal funding for art depended upon the show’s success. Each regional chairperson was thus instructed by Bruce to select their best work, which would be brought together at the *National Exhibition of Art by the Public Works of Art Project* at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. The exhibition ran from 24 April to 20 May and comprised more than 500 items, including eight murals, seven galleries of oil paintings, a gallery each for watercolours and prints, and a small number of sculptures, ceramics, batiks and ironwork.³³² Given the profile of the exhibition, incendiary subject matter was to be avoided (as was attested to by the removal of Cadmus’s painting) and, as one commentator observed with more than a modicum of understatement, there were no

³²⁸ Stanley Lotharp [?] to Force, PWAP, 26 December 1933.

³²⁹ Criss, Project Card, 28 December 1934.

³³⁰ McKinzie, *The New Deal*, pp. 13-16.

³³¹ Force as cited in “WPA Art Works Litter Basements, Says Former Head of City Project,” *New York Sun* 4 April 1941.

³³² Final Report on the PWAP [Robert to Hopkins], 30 June 1934, Public Works of Art Project, Selected Administrative and Business Records, 1933-1934, AAA, Reel DC12.

“bomb-throwing paintings contributed under Uncle Sam’s patronage.”³³³ The exhibition was greeted with a round of generally laudatory reviews, and a number of modernist works executed by leftist were in evidence, including Bolotowsky’s *In a Barbershop*, Criss’s *City Store Fronts*, and Matulka’s *Still Life Composition*.³³⁴ Not only did the *New York World Telegram* conclude that the tax-payer’s money had not been irresponsibly squandered, but in a gesture of approval the President and Mrs. Roosevelt spent more than an hour at the preview and selected thirty-two easel paintings for the White House.³³⁵

A pared down version of the exhibition subsequently travelled to MoMA (only 155 of the original objects displayed in the Capitol were included) and Watson concluded that this showcasing of the works was particularly “symbolic and significant.”³³⁶ Located in the heart of the metropolis where the artist had previously been condemned to “artificial valuations” and the “wild economic gamble” of a “worn-out system of promotion, appreciation and production,” the exhibition demonstrated the positive effects of government patronage.³³⁷ However not everyone was so sanguine about the benefits of public art. Not at all convinced by the merit of the works, a reviewer at *Parnassus* breathed “a prayer of thankfulness” that only a portion of the art shown in Washington travelled to New York.³³⁸ The bulk of the work was deemed to be “inadequate in technique and lacking both form and significance.”³³⁹ Technical deficiencies aside, what was truly disappointing was that many of the paintings displayed “neither originality nor honesty” and were found to be “savoring of propaganda.”³⁴⁰ The reviewer for the *Daily Worker* agreed. With few exceptions the work merely glossed over the current economic crisis and demonstrated that

³³³ Helen Buchalter, “Social Views vs. Art — and PWAP Exhibit Excels,” *Washington Daily*, 28 April 1934.

³³⁴ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 98.

³³⁵ Emily Genauer, “Cost of Art Project Held Fully Justified,” *New York World Telegram*, 28 April 1934; “Roosevelt Selects 32 CWA Paintings for White House,” *New York American*, 24 April 1934.

³³⁶ Watson, “The Innocent Bystander,” *MA* 27.11 (November 1934), p. 602.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*

³³⁸ M[argaretta] S[alinger], “Opening the New York Season,” *Parnassus* 6.5 (October 1934), p. 20.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

revolutionary dissatisfaction was being tempered with inadequate relief provisions.³⁴¹ As one would expect Watson was not of the same opinion, arguing instead that the show provided clear evidence that “under less affected and more general and concrete forms of encouragement, [the artist’s] production [has] become less hothouse, more natural, more rooted, and consequently stronger.”³⁴²

That same spring, however, when Roosevelt decided to close the CWA in an early (and wholly unsuccessful) effort to balance the budget, the PWAP was also liquidated. On 28 April 1934, only four days after the exhibition opened at the Corcoran, the project was officially discontinued. Concessions were made by Hopkins to ensure the completion of projects already on the books, and the PWAP wrapped up its activities by June 30. In all 3,521 artists were employed (more than one thousand more than originally planned), 753 murals and 405 mural designs had been completed, and the total allotment to carry out and complete the work amounted to \$1,408,381 (thus putting the project over-budget by almost \$400,000).³⁴³ Certainly much had been accomplished through the establishment of the first federally-funded public art project in American history and the PWAP would serve as the prototype for the development of subsequent projects. As Watson stated a few months after the PWAP’s termination, “the Government had been richly rewarded for its too temporary experiment.”³⁴⁴ In aesthetic terms, Robert concluded in his final report to Hopkins that the project had been born “exactly at the right psychological moment.”³⁴⁵ Since the Armory Show in 1913 American artists had been going through a period of “eclecticism,” but by the late 1920s the artist had finally “turned his mind away from theorizing for its own sake toward the life and people of his own country.”³⁴⁶ The advent of the project thus coincided with a “new nationalistic movement in our art” and it was deemed that no coercion was necessary to create a “truly native” artistic record.³⁴⁷ Robert was

³⁴¹ Seymour Waldman, “Roosevelt Likes Paintings that Gloss Over Crisis,” *DW*, 27 April 1934.

³⁴² Watson, “The Innocent Bystander,” p. 602.

³⁴³ Final Report on the PWAP.

³⁴⁴ Watson, “The Innocent Bystander,” p. 601.

³⁴⁵ Final Report on the PWAP.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

particularly buoyed by the fact that paintings and sculptures reflecting European influences “were the rare exception in our national exhibition.”³⁴⁸

While the bulk of the work produced during the project’s short life adhered to some version of the aesthetic nationalism promoted by Bruce and Watson, I want to emphasize that this did not preclude the employment of modernists. In contradistinction to standard accounts of art produced under state patronage during the 1930s, there existed a far more substantial measure of freedom for modernists than previously acknowledged. Moreover, the project offered relief to artists with differing degrees of political affiliation with the left, providing a framework within which a number of Communist-initiated groups operated, most importantly the Unemployed Artists’ Group and its successor the Artist’s Union. As the example of Davis demonstrates, the PWAP enabled artists with a commitment to both radical politics and modernist aesthetics to earn a living as unionized labourers whose work was paid for by the federal government. That being said, if their efforts were largely overwhelmed within the context of the PWAP, the subsequent establishment of the WPA/FAP a year later would provide modernists on the left with even greater opportunities to participate in the production of public art.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Chapter Three

The Federal Art Project: Extending the Horizons of Modern Art

The PWAP fundamentally transformed the discourse around art patronage in the US and, at least in the short term, effectively challenged the subordination of artistic production and reception to the caprices of the market. As a product of the interventionist policies characteristic of the early New Deal — a phase in which state power was wielded to regulate corporate capital and manage production in an effort to achieve greater economic security — the PWAP demonstrated that the managerialist stance promoted by leading ideologues within the administration included cultural production. With the failing art market working as a foil to offset the virtues of federal patronage, the inauguration of the project symbolized the administration's intention to maintain and support artistic production during a time of crisis. Although conceived as a short-term measure, the PWAP suggested a way to fundamentally reshape relations between artists and the state and, as a watershed in American cultural policy, it set a number of important precedents for subsequent New Deal cultural initiatives, namely the FAP, established in August 1935. The connections between art and politics were, however, complex and changed dramatically as the decade unfolded. In addition to ongoing issues faced by artists and administrators, such as the impermanency of the art programmes, the rancorous debates over art and nationalism, and the viability of modernism itself, there would soon be a new constellation of challenges to deal with, predominantly those accompanying the rise of fascism abroad and the concomitant shifts in policy on the part of both New Dealers and the CPUSA. In this chapter I will address these shifts in relation to the FAP and examine the ways in which this project provided a framework that was responsive to modernists committed to radical politics during the mid-1930s.

Funded by the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935, the WPA was established by Executive Order on May 6 to oversee and co-ordinate federal work relief programmes. Through its provisions 3.5 million workers were to be taken off the

relief rolls and given a security wage as federal employees. Under the charge of Hopkins the projects were administered by the individual states and required local sponsorship. While the WPA's implementation of "work relief" over "direct relief" has been the subject of much interpretative debate, with some commentators, such as Frances Piven and Richard Cloward, viewing "work relief" as merely a conservative move to restore stability by putting the unemployed back to work and thereby lessen the potential for political unrest, I do not feel that such interpretations sufficiently capture the impetus behind Hopkins's desire to launch a massive work relief programme.³⁴⁹ While I in no way wish to underestimate the influence of radical discontent and labour militancy at mid-decade — in 1934 there was an explosion of unrest with 1,856 work stoppages involving almost a million and a half workers — fear of worker insurgency alone does not seem an adequate explanation for the enactment of federal relief provisions.³⁵⁰

Despite the instability that characterized Depression-era America, the country was hardly poised on the brink of revolution and any explanation of New Deal legislation should, as Michael Goldfield has convincingly argued, accord "significant weight to important social forces," while also leaving room "for varying types of influence and interaction of these forces with the state."³⁵¹ In contradistinction to commentators such as Badger, who suggests that it was "political confidence, rather than political fear" that provided the impetus for work relief, Hemingway offers a more nuanced view and contends that the administration set up the projects "in part as New Deal propaganda agencies, in part as make-work projects, and in part from genuine principle."³⁵² Those who maintain that New Deal policy was merely a minimal response designed to quell the turbulence of the poor through the provision of jobs as a means of restoring employment as the cornerstone of social control, or that work relief was just a conservative contraction of the government's welfare commitment, miss much of what

³⁴⁹ Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (Tavistock: London, 1972), pp. 45-119.

³⁵⁰ Badger, *The New Deal*, p. 130.

³⁵¹ Goldfield, "Worker Insurgency," p. 1277.

³⁵² Badger, *The New Deal*, p. 202; Hemingway, "Cultural Democracy by Default," p. 285.

was most progressive about the New Deal, including measures to establish a cultural democracy which, while limited, remain unprecedented nonetheless.

The boost the Democrats received with their mid-term election success in 1934 gave policy-makers the momentum to push for much-needed welfare improvements. Hopkins was committed to including the arts within the provisions of the WPA, insisting that artists had been “hit just as hard by unemployment as any other productive worker.”³⁵³ Although the need to allocate scarce resources led to the requirement that ninety percent of WPA workers came from the relief rolls, resulting in the degradation of the means test that Hopkins had wanted to avoid, four projects were established under “Federal One,” including art, music, theatre, and writing (the Historical and Records Survey Project was added later). However, the role of New Deal ideology should not be overlooked and administrators had broader goals than simply alleviating the artist’s financial distress and maintaining their skills. As Badger suggests, “They wanted to make art more American, more accessible to the public, and more democratic.”³⁵⁴ Running from 1935 to 1943 the FAP was under the directorship of Holger Cahill and included divisions for murals, easel painting, sculpture, and graphic design. Moreover, commissions granted under the FAP were not awarded on the basis of “quality,” which fundamentally distinguished it from other federal art initiatives, namely the Treasury Section (run by Bruce), which hired artists on a highly selective basis according to criteria of competence in order to secure the “best” art available.³⁵⁵

Vaster in scale and broader in cultural and ideological import, the FAP was neither as elitist nor as concerned with conventional notions of cultural tradition as either of the Treasury programmes that ran concurrently. Under Cahill’s direction the project (although subject to regional variations) was also characterized by a greater

³⁵³ Hopkins as cited in Badger, *The New Deal*, p. 216.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

³⁵⁵ The differences between the governing principles, institutional constraints, and ideological rationales of the FAP and the Treasury projects has been dealt with elsewhere; see, for example, McKinzie, *The New Deal*, pp. 39-42.

degree of openness to artistic innovation than its predecessor, the PWAP, and it was marked by a commitment to fostering a more democratic cultural framework, both with respect to artistic production *and* reception. Bearing in mind that the FAP manifested the outlook of Cahill in certain key respects and was, of course, guided by the pre-given administrative imperatives of Hopkins and the Washington bureaucrats, I want to assess the ways in which artists working on the project also exercised a significant degree of autonomy in deciding what to paint and how to paint it. Central to my investigation is an evaluation of the degree of confluence between the democratic idealism of figures such as Cahill and those of modernists with leftist political sympathies. The ideological framing of the FAP and the interests of modernist artists on the left were by no means mutually exclusive. In what follows I will explore the points of overlap and divergence in their respective positions. The central questions to be addressed in this chapter thus include: in what ways were the ideals of the FAP consonant with those of leftist artists working with a modernist visual vocabulary? Where did the views of artists and critics on political and cultural progressiveness diverge from those promulgated by the state and its administrators? How did modernists with radical political sympathies navigate a complex artistic field that was divided by contending ideologies around issues such as Americanism, realism, and modernism itself? And finally, could modernist painting fulfill the requirements of a “social” art as demanded by those on the left which was also consonant with New Deal visions of an art that was both “democratic” and aligned with the imperatives of indigenous American expression?

New Horizons in American Art

In September 1936 an exhibition of work done under the FAP opened at the Museum of Modern Art (fig. 36). Entitled *New Horizons in American Art*, the show was, according to the foreword written by Barr in the accompanying catalogue, intended to present “a documented survey of one year’s activity,” with the not unimportant caveat that the work had been selected for “its artistic value alone.”³⁵⁶ Although there had

³⁵⁶ Barr, “Foreword” in Cahill, *New Horizons in American Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936); reprinted Arno Press, 1969, p. 7.

been earlier exhibitions of FAP work mounted in New York, this show was particularly significant in that it was the first major display of the project's achievements and was intended to serve as "a visual report to the public."³⁵⁷ The catalogue included an introductory essay written by Cahill and the exhibition was curated by Dorothy Canning Miller. Miller would later be better known as a champion of the Abstract Expressionists through the series of six shows mounted at MoMA devoted to postwar art.³⁵⁸ She first encountered Cahill (who she would marry in 1938) at the Newark Museum in 1925 when he was on staff. She joined the curatorial team in 1926, staying on until 1929. In 1932 Miller was asked by Cahill, who was appointed acting director of MoMA during Barr's absence, to work on the catalogue for the exhibition *American Painting and Sculpture, 1862-1932*.³⁵⁹ In October 1934 she was hired by MoMA as an assistant to Barr and *New Horizons* was the first exhibition she directed.³⁶⁰

New Horizons was comprised of 500 works by more than 170 artists from the mural, easel, graphic arts, and sculpture divisions. The show was meant to demonstrate that, as Cahill stated in the catalogue, the FAP was healing the breach between the artist and the public, with the result that "new horizons have come into view."³⁶¹ With some 5,300 artists employed on the project, government patronage was ensuring that "a broader and socially sounder base for American art" was being established across the nation.³⁶² Following Cahill's introductory essay, in which he charted the development of American art from eighteenth-century colonial painting to the mid-1930s, the catalogue leads with murals, represented by a diversity of studies, photographs,

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁸ Bearing titles such as *Fourteen Americans* and *Sixteen Americans*, the exhibitions were held periodically from 1942 through 1963 and served to promote a number of the Abstract Expressionists, among them Rothko, Pollock, Kline, and Still.

³⁵⁹ In 1932-1933 she also collaborated with Cahill on *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900* and *American Sources of Modern Art*. In 1933-1934 Miller worked with Cahill on the First Municipal Art Exhibition at Rockefeller Center, where she met Barr. On Miller see Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr.*, pp. 234-238.

³⁶⁰ Miller was successively appointed assistant curator of painting and sculpture (1935-1941); associate curator (1942); curator (1943-1947); curator of museum collections (1947-1967); senior curator (1968-1969); and from 1984 until her death in 2003, honorary trustee.

³⁶¹ Cahill, *New Horizons*, p. 29.

³⁶² *Ibid.*

cartoons, and models. As Cahill outlined, the early 1930s witnessed a revival of interest in muralism, stimulated in large part by artists such as Benton, Robinson, and, more importantly, through the Mexican muralists. He singled out the mural for its potential to reach a wider public than easel painting and aligned it with the broader goals of the New Deal art projects, namely to achieve a closer relationship between artist and public and to integrate art into the everyday lives of American citizens. As he had affirmed prior to the establishment of the FAP, "The contemporary emphasis upon human significance in art gets its strongest expression in mural painting."³⁶³ He insisted that "mural painting is not a studio art" and "by its very nature it is social."³⁶⁴ As such, he argued that the arts in general, and mural painting in particular, were an integral part of that "more abundant life" which Roosevelt deemed to be the true measure of a nation's progress. Writing a year later, Cahill further maintained that muralism had "always been associated with the expression of social meanings, the experience, history, ideas, and beliefs of a community."³⁶⁵ He was convinced that the murals being painted under federal patronage promised "a truly monumental art which will express with honesty, clarity, and power the experience and ideas of American communities."³⁶⁶

Since the inception of the FAP 434 murals were completed under the project's auspices, with some fifty-five more in progress. It was this aspect of *New Horizons* that received the most critical attention.³⁶⁷ Moreover, as Hemingway points out, the exhibition clearly registered the differences between the FAP and the Section on the issue of stylistic pluralism.³⁶⁸ Unlike the Section, which was guided by the principle of quality rather than relief, and which, under the direction of Bruce, was marked by a more conservative aesthetic, the FAP eschewed notions of the "solitary genius" and

³⁶³ Cahill in Cahill and Barr, eds, *Art in America: A Complete Survey* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1934), p. 105.

³⁶⁴ Cahill, *New Horizons*, pp. 32-33.

³⁶⁵ Cahill, "Mural America," *Architectural Record* 82.3 (Summer 1937), p. 65.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

³⁶⁷ Cahill, *New Horizons*, p. 33. From its inception in 1935 until its dissolution in 1943, the FAP was responsible for the creation of 2,566 murals (of which approximately 200 were commissioned for public spaces in New York City); see McKinzie, *The New Deal*, p. 105.

³⁶⁸ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 176.

the “rare, occasional masterpiece.”³⁶⁹ According to Cahill the FAP thus offered “great[er] scope and freedom for a more complete personal expression.”³⁷⁰ Writing in *Parnassus*, the liberal and well-respected art critic Emily Genauer observed that the diversity of works on view seemed to suggest that under Cahill’s directorship the project operated with “no axe to grind, no political ends to serve, no status quo to defend.”³⁷¹ As Genauer further asserted, unlike in Mexico, where “murals had to be the instruments for proselytizing to the public,” or in the Soviet Union, where artists must “accept Socialist construction as their only source of inspiration,” American artists were not “beholden to turn out pictures which would be subtle propaganda for one social, economic, political or religious set-up or another.”³⁷²

While Genauer’s conclusions regarding the complete freedom of expression afforded muralists on the project accorded well with New Deal ideals of a broad and egalitarian democracy, her assertions had already been proven at best overly optimistic and, at worst, inaccurate. While I do not interpret FAP murals as simply the material form of some centralized New Deal ideology and maintain that the projects, especially in contrast to the Section, did indeed provide the potential for counter-discourse, Genauer clearly had a short memory. Only two years earlier, in June 1934, anxiety over the political content of the Coit Tower’s PWAP murals in San Francisco resulted in the temporary closing of the tower followed by the obliteration of a trio of decorative panels framing Clifford Wight’s *Leaders of California Life*.³⁷³ Furthermore, the following summer a number of murals designed for public buildings by artists of the Public Works Division, such as the murals for the prison chapel at Riker’s Island Penitentiary by Ben Shahn and Lou Block, were rejected by the New York Municipal Art Commission (which had the power of veto over mural commissions in the city) as “psychologically unfit” and “anti-social.”³⁷⁴ Countering Genauer’s celebration of the artist’s freedom under government patronage, an editorial in *Art Front* in July 1935

³⁶⁹ Cahill, *New Horizons*, p. 18.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³⁷¹ Genauer, “New Horizons in American Art,” *Parnassus* 8.4 (October 1936), p. 3.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁷³ On the Coit Tower murals see Lee, *Painting on the Left*, pp. 128-159 and Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, pp. 92-97.

³⁷⁴ See Davis, “‘We Reject’ — The Art Commission,” *AF* 1.6 (July 1935), pp. 4-5.

concluded that murals designed for public buildings seemed to “meet with official approval in inverse order to their social and artistic worth” and some prescriptions, such as no nudes or overt party political content, were in place.³⁷⁵

Although certain conditions did limit the output of project artists, I do not wish to argue for an overdetermined muralism. Despite the kinds of prescriptions referred to above, works in *New Horizons* manifested a “rich social content” according to Genauer, an aspect further acknowledged by critic and prominent activist E. M. Benson in the *Magazine of Art*. Offering an overview of federal patronage initiatives Benson praised the government’s “new-found cultural democracy.”³⁷⁶ At the same time he lamented the fact that the other projects seemed intent upon making the American Scene “the theme song” of their programmes, while also over-emphasizing notions of “quality” with the result that they tended to “lose track of the larger issues at stake.”³⁷⁷ As demonstrated in *New Horizons*, however, the FAP had managed to bring together aesthetic and social concerns and thereby offered the nation’s artists the “maximum opportunity for growth.”³⁷⁸ As Benson further stressed in relation to the formal and thematic diversity permitted under the FAP:

Here, at last, were no artists having to sit on aesthetic flagpoles to get into the public headlines, but serious craftsmen who had eaten the black bread of poverty and now, with what the bulwark of the Government was offering them, were prepared to set down their feelings and thoughts in a direct and straightforward manner.³⁷⁹

Even critics on the left, who had largely taken a dismissive attitude to the works produced under the aegis of the earlier PWAP and who railed against the “reactionary and antidemocratic” biases of the Treasury projects, greeted the alternative offered by the FAP as a “splendid one.”³⁸⁰ In an extended evaluation of federal patronage appearing in *Art Front* in May 1937, one Peter Vane (surely a pseudonym) contended

³⁷⁵ “Morals in Murals,” *AF* 1.6 (July 1935), p. 3.

³⁷⁶ Benson, “Art on Parole,” *MA* 29.11 (November 1936), p. 696.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 699-700.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 700.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁰ Peter Vane, “Big Words by Big Wigs: What Art Officials Think About While the Artist Fights for a Permanent Project,” *AF* 3.3-4 (May 1937), pp. 7; 26.

that *New Horizons* demonstrated the differences between the FAP and the Treasury projects. For Vane, one of the key distinctions (and one that would ultimately lead to the project's downfall) lay in the fact that the FAP depended upon funds voted on by Congress — representatives of the people who were democratically elected rather than merely appointed into positions of power. Moreover, he quoted at length from Cahill's introductory essay and labelled it "an important progressive document in the history of art in our country."³⁸¹

Despite the generally warm welcome that *New Horizons* received, such laudatory sentiments need to be put in perspective. Writing in *Art Front* in the autumn of 1936, the leftist critic Elizabeth McCausland sounded a more cautionary note in her evaluation of the exhibition. McCausland, who wrote regular art reviews for *New Masses* from 1937 to 1939 under the pseudonym Elizabeth Noble, was radicalized during the 1920s, primarily through her involvement with the Sacco-Vanzetti defense committee. Following her move to New York in 1935 she became active in the Artists' Union and the American Artists' Congress. As Hemingway details, while she championed documentary photography as a "powerful social weapon," her aesthetic was marked by a "bland inclusiveness" that enabled her to simultaneously lend support to modernism.³⁸² Like other commentators on the left, while she lauded the collective effort demonstrated by the project and felt that the works produced under the FAP were "vastly superior to the wooden and stereotyped creations of the Treasury," she maintained that project workers were operating under a "still too restricted hand."³⁸³ Furthermore, unlike the previous mural exhibition at MoMA in 1932, which included Gropper's *The Writing on the Wall* and Shahn's *Sacco and Vanzetti*, none of the more recent murals pictured inflammatory subject matter. As Hemingway points out, "*New Horizons* can be taken as showing what the Washington

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³⁸² McCausland, "Four Art Exhibitions," *NM* 30.5 (January 1939), pp. 28-29. For, example, she expressed support for the modernist paintings in her review "Artists' Congress' Second Show," *NM* 27.8 (17 May 1938), p. 27. In addition to the papers housed at the AAA, on McCausland see McCoy, "Elizabeth McCausland, Critic and Idealist," *AAAJ* 2.2 (1966), pp. 16-20; Platt, *Art and Politics*, pp. 65-84; and Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 112.

³⁸³ McCausland, "New Horizons," *AF* 2.9 (September-October 1936), pp. 7-9; see also "Official Art," *AF* 2.10 (November 1936), pp. 8-10.

office wanted the FAP to look like.”³⁸⁴ What is particularly interesting here is that what Washington wanted, to some degree at least, seemed to accord well with what many of those on the left were also seeking at this juncture.

While the works in the exhibition did deal with a wide range of subject matter, the murals bespoke two major developments: what Genauer described as “the complete eclipse of the old style mural in America” — namely moralizing allegories depicted in an academic style; and a thematic preoccupation with the American Scene (despite Benson’s comments to the contrary).³⁸⁵ Again, an emphasis on indigenous subject matter fitted well with the rhetoric of New Deal ideologues who were keenly in favour of developing a strong *national* cultural movement. As F. A. Whiting, editor of the *Magazine of Art*, opined in anticipation of *New Horizons*, “the promised land no longer lies along the Seine. The new horizons are those of plain and mountain and prairie.”³⁸⁶ Whiting, an early champion of the New Deal ideal of a democratic and publicly-funded art, was entirely confident that “American artists as never before are unself-consciously at home.”³⁸⁷

However, while critics such as Whiting and Genauer were pleased that the murals were remarkably free from the preoccupations of the School of Paris, the mural selection nevertheless included a number of decidedly modernist works. Among those on view were colour studies and photographs of the completed *Music* panels for Falmouth High School (Falmouth, Massachusetts) by Karl Knaths (figs 37 and 38), an early modernist who was influenced by Kandinsky and who worked in a Cubist idiom; Max Spivak’s expressionist *Puppets* designed for the Astoria Branch Library (Long Island) (fig. 39); and Wyatt Davis’s photomural collage *Mechanical Aspects of Airplane Construction* slated for the Newark Airport (fig. 40).³⁸⁸ The exhibition also

³⁸⁴ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 177.

³⁸⁵ Genauer, “New Horizons,” p. 5.

³⁸⁶ Whiting, “New Horizons,” *MA* 29.6 (August 1936), p. 493.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁸ The literature on Knaths is scant. He graduated from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1916 and it was while working as a guard at the Chicago presentation of the Armory Show that he first encountered modernism, aspects of which he subsequently incorporated into his own work. After a brief stay in New York in 1919, he became a lifelong resident of Provincetown, Massachusetts, but continued to visit

showcased a large number of works manifesting different approaches to abstraction, both non-objective and 'realist.' Studies, a finished panel, and a maquette for Gorky's mural cycle *Aviation: Evolution of Forms under Aerodynamic Limitations* (figs 41 and 42), which was commissioned for the second floor foyer of the Administration Building at the Newark Airport, were included, as were colour studies for all eleven of the proposed murals for the social rooms of each housing unit at the Williamsburg Housing Project in Brooklyn.

Taken together, although the majority of paintings on view at *New Horizons* were biased toward the American Scene, the work of the New York Mural Division provided a notable exception. Given that the FAP was decentralized, each region operated with a different degree of aesthetic latitude. The New York region, where FAP activity was overwhelmingly concentrated such that by 1937 it employed almost forty-five percent of all project artists, was under the directorship of McMahon.³⁸⁹ Originally offered Cahill's post as director of the FAP by Hopkins (which she declined), she had undertaken graduate work in both fine arts and social work and had been involved with relief projects for artists in New York since 1932. Although Cahill later disparagingly claimed that McMahon "never was a good art person. She was just a big, blustering bluff" — a comment made within the postwar context of Cahill's disavowal of his past and his subsequent embrace of Abstract Expressionism — her appointment as Regional Director is not surprising given her experience in administering work relief to artists, combined with her first-hand knowledge of the extent of the crisis in New York.³⁹⁰ In addition, despite her reputation as an "Iron Woman" who could be "impetuous" and "a trifle belligerent," McMahon was open-

New York frequently, participating in the Society of Independent Artists' exhibition in 1921 and Katherine Dreier's Société Anonyme exhibition in Brooklyn in 1926. His first one-person exhibition was held at The Phillips Collection (then the Phillips Memorial Gallery) in 1929 and was followed by a show at Daniel Gallery, New York in 1930. He was only enrolled on the FAP for a short time and later taught at The Phillips Art School. See Paul Moscanyi, *Karl Knaths* (Washington, D.C.: Phillips Gallery, 1957). For Knath's own exposition of his approach to muralism see "Mural Education," *Art for the Millions*, pp. 67-68. Knaths personal papers are in the collection of the AAA.

³⁸⁹ McKinzie, *The New Deal*, p. 93.

³⁹⁰ Cahill, Oral History Interview, April 1960, AAA.

minded in terms of aesthetics, as demonstrated by her appointing Diller, an abstract painter, to supervise the Mural Division.³⁹¹

Prior to the formation of the FAP Diller had met a number of modern artists while studying at the Arts Student League during the late 1920s and early 1930s. In fact, many of the modernists he later supervised on the Mural Division had already formed a loose, but recognizable alliance at the League. Among those with whom he became acquainted were Harry Bowden, Criss, Davis, Matulka, George McNeil, Eugene Morley, and Albert Swinden. By 1930, when Diller, like Criss and McNeil, was studying under Matulka, he was well-versed in avant-garde formal developments and had already made his way from Cézanne to synthetic Cubism. Moreover, in 1931, works by prominent American modernists such as Gorky, Graham, and Matulka were assembled by Davis for an exhibition at the League (apparently in honour of Léger's first visit to New York), where Davis was also teaching in 1931-1932.³⁹²

Following a period of study with Hans Hofmann in New York during the early 1930s, Diller was accepted onto the PWAP in January 1934 with what were described as "Braque-like" compositions.³⁹³ The committee had been sufficiently pleased with his paintings to consider a commission for "a decorative panel."³⁹⁴ Throughout the decade he worked with a gridded spatial structure and developed an entirely non-objective approach to abstraction that was indebted to Cubism and Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism. However, his series of PWAP *Abstractions* (figs 43 to 45) combined linear elements with softer, biomorphic forms suspended within a flat, indeterminate space. He was also a charter member of the American Abstract Artists (AAA), a group of painters and sculptors who, in response to the overarching emphasis upon American Scene painting within the New York milieu, were intent upon creating a forum and an

³⁹¹ McKinzie, *The New Deal*, pp. 81; 40. Published statements by McMahon on the arts project include: "The Trend of the Government in Art," *Parnassus* 8.1 (January 1936), pp. 3-6; and "A General View of the WPA FAP in New York City and State," *The New Deal Art Projects*, pp. 51-76.

³⁹² See Patterson Sims in *Jan Matulka, 1890-1972*, p. 28.

³⁹³ Diller, Progress Report, 1 February 1934; undated, unsigned typewritten note accompanying Diller's Progress Report.

³⁹⁴ Diller, Progress Report, 1 February 1934.

audience for abstract painting.³⁹⁵ The AAA, which began meeting informally in January 1936, included artists such as Bolotowsky, Rosalind Bengelsdorf Browne, Byron Browne, Balcomb and Gertrude Greene, Kelpe, Carl Holty, Holtzman, George L. K. Morris, and Swinden.³⁹⁶ Although the group embraced all forms of abstraction, they demonstrated a bias for hard-edge geometry and their efforts were directed toward forging a place for abstraction through annual exhibitions, publications, and lectures.

It was, however, within the FAP's Mural Division that the AAA, like other New York modernists, would find one of the most important venues for the promotion of abstraction. As McMahon later recalled, mural projects were usually the subject of lengthy conferences and the allocation of abstract works "was no mean problem."³⁹⁷ As these murals were destined for public spaces, they required the approval of both the sponsor, who paid for the materials, as well as the Municipal Art Commission, who exercised the power of veto over the mural's final form when a city building was involved. Diller and his scouts were thus "constantly on the prowl for good tax-supported locations and receptive sponsors" and he was remarkably successful in securing commissions for many of his fellow abstractionists.³⁹⁸ As Diller explained, he ardently believed in the artist's right to freedom of expression, contending that abstract murals "symbolize the effort that is being made . . . to stimulate rather than to restrict

³⁹⁵ Although the AAA has never dissolved, the association was most active from 1936 to 1941. On the group see Larsen "The American Abstract Artists Group: A History and Evaluation of Its Impact Upon American Art," PhD thesis, Northwestern University, 1975. Larsen's dissertation is presented in a much abbreviated form in "The American Abstract Artists: A Documentary History, 1936-1941," *AAAJ* 14. 1 (1974), pp. 2-7; and "Going Abstract in the '30's," *Art in America* 64.5 (September-October 1976), pp. 70-79. See also Lane and Larsen, *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America*. On the relationship between the AAA and the FAP see Rosalind Bengelsdorf Browne, "The American Abstract Artists and WPA FAP," *The New Deal Art Projects*, pp. 223-244. Bengelsdorf Browne was a founding member of the AAA and an employee of the FAP from 1935 to 1939.

³⁹⁶ By the end of the decade the group also included a number of European artists living in the US, among them Albers, Héliou, and Mondrian. Gorky and de Kooning attended some of the early meetings but declined membership, as did Davis (who wrote a letter to the *New York Post*, 25 February 1938, in which he emphasized that he did not belong to the group and did not agree with most of the opinions issuing from it).

³⁹⁷ McMahon, "A General View," p. 59.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

the direction of painting, which, in the last analysis, should be the artists' prerogative."³⁹⁹

Within a cultural context riven by pitched battles over what constituted an appropriate "American" art, Diller took a radical course when he awarded federal commissions to modernists, especially as the other federal projects were not at all hospitable to abstraction. As Olin Dows, chief of TRAP, wrote to an artist in 1936: "Abstractions are impossible for us to use under this Project. I would suggest that you do no more abstractions like the one you sent in. Won't you, instead, do some more landscapes?"⁴⁰⁰ As Dows's request demonstrates, the FAP allowed for a much greater range of style and content and Diller was determined to give abstractionists equal access to government patronage.⁴⁰¹ Moreover, in defending his controversial choice of modernists for the Williamsburg project, he reasoned that since many of the dwellers in the housing project worked in factories anyway, they would not want to return home to murals of muscular workers brandishing tools (a dig at other forms of painting being pursued contemporaneously). Downplaying the polemical aspects of his attitude toward abstraction for the benefit of FAP officials, Diller explained:

The decision to place abstract murals in these rooms was made because these areas were intended to provide a place of relaxation and entertainment for the tenants. The more arbitrary color, possible when not determined by the description of objects, enables the artist to place an emphasis on its psychological potential to stimulate relaxation. The arbitrary use of shapes provided an opportunity to create colorful patterns clearly related to the interior architecture and complementing the architect's intentions.⁴⁰²

In addition, he also made concerted efforts to ensure that an artist's integrity and freedom were respected throughout the planning and execution of individual

³⁹⁹ Diller, "Abstract Murals," *Art for the Millions*, p. 69.

⁴⁰⁰ Dows as cited in Park and Markowitz, *New Deal for Art*, p. 31.

⁴⁰¹ In addition to those Diller employed for the Newark and Williamsburg projects, other modernists he recruited for the Mural Division included Rosalind Bengelsdorf Browne, Giorgio Cavallon, Gertrude Greene, Harry Holtzman, Lee Krasner, Leo Lances, Léger, Michael Loew, Ralph Rosenberg, Louis Schanker, and John Von Wicht.

⁴⁰² Diller, "Abstract Murals," p. 69. For a tribute to Diller see Bengelsdorf Browne, "The American Abstract Artists," p. 227.

assignments. This was necessary because in contrast to the easel painting division, where once a painter had demonstrated that they were competent and in need of support they were put on a salary and turned loose to paint in their own studio, the mural division was more closely supervised. The artist had to satisfy a committee on matters of style and content and sketches were required to be submitted for approval every step of the way.

Although none of the studies for either the Newark or Williamsburg murals were reproduced in the catalogue accompanying *New Horizons*, modernist muralism received good coverage in the exhibition itself. Gorky's ten large-scale oil on canvas panels, which he began working on in 1935, were represented by one completed panel; a model showing the interior of the Administration Building with the murals in situ; along with photographs of the largest panels. The murals, which would cover some 1,530 square feet, manifest a synthesis of aesthetic influences. Executed in strong, saturated colours, the panels feature the biomorphic forms of Arp and Miró combined with the precise mechanical imagery of Léger, all arranged within a Cubist spatial framework.

The mural commissions for the Williamsburg Housing Project, which were awarded in 1936, were given to twelve New York modernists: Bolotowsky, Harry Bowden, Browne, Criss, Davis, Greene, Kelpe, de Kooning, Matulka, George McNeil, Eugene Morely and Albert Swinden. As Hemingway correctly notes, the degree of their commitment to the left varied, as did the nature of their individual engagements with abstraction, but among them Bolotowsky, Browne, Criss, Davis, Greene, Matulka and Morley may be characterized leftists.⁴⁰³ Their murals were represented by a chart showing the general plan of the housing project, with the location of the social rooms accompanied by an index of each artist commissioned, along with a model showing one housing unit with murals by Davis and Kelpe.⁴⁰⁴ All of the colour studies were, at

⁴⁰³ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 175.

⁴⁰⁴ Additionally, Davis was represented in the exhibition's Easel Section with a small oil on canvas entitled *Waterfront*, once thought to be a preparatory work for the lost *Waterfront Forms* mural, an FAP commission that was believed to have been executed for the Faculty Lounge at Brooklyn College, but

this stage, simply entitled *Abstraction*, and each was to be executed in oil on canvas, with projected measurements ranging from Bowden's study for a canvas measuring approximately 8 x 17 feet to Matulka's study for a panel approximately 8 x 7 feet.

As *New Horizons* unequivocally demonstrated, the ideology of the FAP was expansive and flexible enough to embrace abstraction, with various styles being accommodated under the guiding principle of democratic pluralism. One of the few controversies incited by the exhibition resulted not from any particular work, abstract or otherwise, but rather centred upon the broader social and cultural purpose of the project. Writing a review of the show for *The New York Times*, Jewell picked up on Barr's "qualifying clause" in his foreword to the catalogue, namely that works had been selected according to "artistic value alone." Jewell suggested that such a task "cannot have been an easy one" given that the project was responsible for the production of "quantities . . . of perfectly terrible art."⁴⁰⁵ So far as he was concerned, the future of the FAP did not look promising and he concluded his review with the assertion that "much depressingly worthless or mediocre art . . . has been and no doubt will go on being produced."⁴⁰⁶ Such disparaging remarks immediately elicited rebuttals from Cahill and Davis.⁴⁰⁷ Responding as Executive Secretary of the American Artists' Congress, Davis offered a scathing rebuke of Jewell's "unintelligent opinions" which merely served to reinforce the ideas of those "who put all art in the category of boondoggling."⁴⁰⁸ Citing Jewell's failure to recognize that the ambition of the FAP was not to turn out masterpieces, Davis emphasized that "such a practice has meaning only for the art dealer and speculator."⁴⁰⁹ Instead, the FAP was intent upon fostering a vital artistic culture and in any "genuine art movement a great reservoir of art is

which the authors of the *Catalogue Raisonné* have determined never existed. For a full account of the discrepancy see entries 1222 and 1223, vol. 2, pp. 624-626.

⁴⁰⁵ Jewell, "Extending Our Horizons," *NYT*, 20 September 1936.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁷ Letter from Cahill printed in "Correspondence Relating to WPA Art Project," *NYT*, 4 October 1936; original included in RG 69, NARA.

⁴⁰⁸ Davis's letter was printed under the heading "American Artists' Congress Apparently Wants Project Universally Praised," *NYT*, 27 September 1936. A copy of Davis's original letter, which runs to four single-spaced pages and is loaded with venom, may also be been found in RG 69, NARA. On Davis's involvement with the Congress see Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*, pp. 65-97, but as previously noted her analysis is mistaken in several aspects.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

created in many forms, both major and minor.”⁴¹⁰ With respect to Jewell’s assertion that no purpose was served by the wide distribution of “average works of art,” Davis rather harshly concluded that such comments would “have more chance of finding favor under a Fascist regime wherein each class is told exactly what it may or may not think or own.”⁴¹¹ As is evident, even committed Marxist thinkers such as Davis, while not satisfied with the extent of federal patronage, were staunch supporters of the gains that had been achieved under the FAP and were eager to support the project’s largely liberal, pluralistic, and democratic provisions.

Cahill and the Art of Democratic Pluralism

While New Deal administrators shared a certain set of broader goals and were united by an overarching commitment to fostering the creation of an American art that was democratically accessible, I am particularly interested in examining how such goals were understood and pursued by Cahill. As director of the FAP and the project’s key spokesperson and ideologue, he was well-suited to his role as cultural manager, both in terms of his administrative experience and his views on the role of art in society. Born in Iceland in 1887, he found his way to New York by 1913, where he enrolled in journalism and creative writing classes at New York University.⁴¹² He later studied aesthetics and art history at Columbia University and attended classes at the New School for Social Research, where his teachers included Dewey and economist Thorstein Veblen. Both Dewey and Veblen were centrally concerned with the improvement of the quality of life for the masses and, as John Vlach remarks, “the social visions of these two men would later stimulate Cahill’s sense of public service.”⁴¹³

Cahill’s early formation is of interest in that, although he would later repudiate any associations with radical politics within the context of the postwar “red scare,” it was

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*

⁴¹² On Cahill see Wendy Jeffers, “Holger Cahill and American Art,” *AAAJ* 31.4 (1991), pp. 2-11 and Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, pp. 151-153.

⁴¹³ John Michael Vlach, “Holger Cahill as Folklorist,” *Journal of American Folklore* 98.388 (1985), p. 149.

during this period that he became interested in socialism. He was friendly with the Communist Mike Gold, along with several of the early contributors to the *Masses*, and it was Gold who gave him his first job as a reporter for the *Bronxville Review* and the *Scarsdale Inquirer*. Given that Cahill had esteemed Gold enough to send him money to study at Harvard and that Gold continued to support Cahill's endeavours into the 1940s (as evinced by Gold's decision to quote *New Horizons* approvingly and champion Cahill's directorship of the FAP in his *Hollow Men* (1941)), one is tempted to assume that they shared some degree of political sympathy.⁴¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, there is little left in Cahill's records to substantiate such an assumption and he was keen to deny any such connection, later labelling Gold "a religious Bolshevik" and claiming that, with respect to Gold's political affiliations, he had "never gone anywhere near it" and "never worked with him in that sense."⁴¹⁵ There is, however, a rather humorous dialogue published by Gold in the *Liberator* in 1921 that suggests otherwise. Written at the time of Cahill's conversion from journalism to art the dialogue is entitled "Two Critics in a Bar-Room" and it lends some credence to Cahill's early affiliation with revolutionary politics:

Gold: You are drifting into dangerous ways, Eddie [Cahill published his first articles under the name Edgar Cahill]. You are drifting away from the revolution.

Cahill: And I am still a revolutionist, Mike. I have, however, found the profoundest revolution of all.

Gold: What is that fellow worker?

Cahill: The revolution in form. You would change the political and economic structure of society . . . [but] it would not change a hair the essential quality and color of human life. There would still be the same grand permanent monotonous facts of life, waiting for expression in art. The generation which expresses them in new, sharp, original ways has accomplished a revolution...⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁴ As Hemingway points out, Gold even asserted that, under Cahill's directorship, there was "a 'red' flavor about the projects;" see *Hollow Men* (New York: International Publishers, 1941), pp. 51-57; Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 153.

⁴¹⁵ Cahill "Reminiscences of Holger Cahill," June 1957, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Columbia University, New York, p. 62.

⁴¹⁶ Mike Gold, "Two Critics in a Bar-Room," *Liberator* (September 1921), pp. 28-29.

As the conversation suggests, Cahill had alighted upon a new means of channeling his “revolutionary” social goals. Art had the power to transform society and those who supported it were “the spade and shovel laborers, the axmen and levelers who prepare the ground where the artists come in and build.”⁴¹⁷ Written more than a decade before the election of Roosevelt and the inception of federal patronage, and long before Cahill’s involvement with the FAP, Gold’s dialogue may provide more insight into Cahill’s motives than any subsequently published public statement.⁴¹⁸

Whether or not Cahill perceived art as a possible path to social revolution, he began to engage with it more seriously in 1919. It was, for example, during this period that he briefly experimented with *Inje-Inje*, a theory of aesthetics that shared certain similarities with Dada and which served as an early testament to his growing interest in the strong communal identity manifest in pre-industrial folk society. Describing his training as entirely “on the modern side,” Cahill worked with John Cotton Dana at the Newark Museum from 1922 to 1929, where Dana pioneered efforts to attract a wider popular audience and cultivate interest in “living” American art.⁴¹⁹ Under Dana, Cahill helped to form the Museum’s collection of contemporary art. Later, having further cultivated his knowledge of American folk art, he returned to Newark to curate shows such as *American Primitives* (1930) and *American Folk Sculpture* (1931), the first comprehensive museum exhibitions on the subject. Dana’s anti-elitist approach was an important early influence on Cahill’s development, and he later acknowledged that a pamphlet written by Dana in 1914 entitled “American Art — How it Can Be Made to Flourish” was one from which he “quoted a good deal” in his writings and public speeches on the FAP.⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁴¹⁸ Interestingly, a copy of Gold’s dialogue is the only item of such vintage preserved in Cahill’s papers; see Jeffers, “Holger Cahill,” note 19, p. 11.

⁴¹⁹ Cahill, “Reminiscences,” p. 177. Dana and Cahill outline their views on the public responsibilities of the museum and the importance of fostering contemporary American art in Dana, “The Museum as an Art Patron;” and Cahill, “Newark: The Museum and American Contemporary Art,” CA 4.3 (March 1929), pp. xxiii-xxvii and xxxv-xxxix respectively.

⁴²⁰ Cahill, “Reminiscences,” p. 176.

While at Newark Cahill also wrote three biographical studies: *Pop Hart* (1928); *A Yankee Adventurer: The Story of Ward and the Taiping Rebellion* (1930); and *Max Weber* (1930). His work on Weber, one of his most ambitious essays up to that point, was done in conjunction with an exhibition at Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery. The text is deserving of closer scrutiny as it provides insight into Cahill's views on modernism and its relation to American art prior to his association with the project.⁴²¹ The Russian-born Weber, who also had ties with Dana, had been a particularly controversial figure in the New York art world during the early decades of the twentieth century. Returning from Europe in 1909 following several years of study, he was commissioned to work out colour schemes for the Newark Museum's exhibition rooms in 1912 and was then offered an exhibition in June 1913. Following on the heels of the Armory Show, the exhibition included seventeen paintings demonstrating Weber's synthesis of European avant-garde developments, particularly his understanding of Cubist spatial developments. The accompanying catalogue essay, written by Dana, represents the first attempt on the part of an American museum director to give the public a sympathetic introduction to modernism. Writing a decade and a half later, Cahill, who was also an early champion of American modernism, opened his discussion of Weber with the statement that since the nineteenth century, American art had no tradition of its own. As a result, American artists now "stood at a crossroads."⁴²² This statement reflects the fact that one of Cahill's abiding preoccupations during the 1920s and 1930s was to define a native tradition in American art, one whose aesthetic heritage stood outside that of the academy. As Cahill later affirmed, "I always had a great contempt for the National Academy. It seemed to me that it was utterly dead."⁴²³ The example of Weber's art, however, offered a way forward and expressed a "feeling for what is native to America."⁴²⁴

⁴²¹ Cahill collaborated with Halpert on a number of projects and they shared an interest in both folk art and contemporary American modernism; see Jeffers, "Holger Cahill," p. 7. The papers of Halpert and the Downtown Gallery are housed at the AAA; see also Lindsay Pollock, *The Girl with the Gallery: Edith Gregor Halpert and the Making of the Modern Art Market* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007).

⁴²² Cahill, *Max Weber* (New York: Downtown Gallery, 1930), p. 2.

⁴²³ Cahill, "Reminiscences," p. 138.

⁴²⁴ Cahill, *Max Weber*, p. 28.

Significantly, it was Weber's use of modernist formal devices, derived from his studies with Matisse in Paris, combined with an interest in more "naïve" artistic traditions, notably Russian folk art, Negro sculpture, and the primitivism of Rousseau, that Cahill deemed especially praiseworthy. Concurring with Weber that "art is the real history of nations" and that "the people find themselves in their great artists," Cahill then reversed traditional assessments of abstract art as a "foreign" import and contended that Weber's abstract phase (1916-1920) should be understood as a "revolt against the narcissism of European art."⁴²⁵ According to Cahill, Weber's abstract arrangements of form were "democratic" in their approach to expression in that they function "as an interpretation of life not as a guide to conduct or propaganda for a certain way of life."⁴²⁶ Furthermore, abstraction had a liberating effect upon the spectator "like memories of sight in which he can move freely and creatively."⁴²⁷ Importantly, Cahill was suggesting that abstract form derived from European formal experiments could fulfill the needs of an art that was at once American and democratic, a notion that would prove pivotal to the role of modernism within the FAP.

Following his tenure at Newark Cahill accepted a post as acting director of exhibitions at MoMA, a position he held from September 1932 to May 1933 during Barr's absence. While at the museum he pursued interests he developed in Newark, curating two exhibitions that dealt more comprehensively with topics addressed in his earlier work, *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900* in 1932 (a show drawn completely from Mrs. Rockefeller's collection of folk art); *American Painting and Sculpture, 1862-1932*, a large survey show mounted in 1932; and, the following year, *American Sources of Modern Art*, the first in a series of exhibitions at MoMA that endeavoured to investigate the aesthetic importance of "naïve," "primitive," and "folk" art traditions. As Cahill's numerous writings on folk art demonstrate, he was returning to the roots of American art in order to divine a "usable past" upon which to anchor the foundations for a new and vital contemporary

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 32; 37.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

art.⁴²⁸ Given that the Depression years were ones of previously unimagined upheaval, there was a widespread desire to emphasize stability and continuity with the nation's past. Like other groups in US society (including the CPUSA) he was looking backward in order to determine the way forward. For Cahill the role of artistic practice in a pre-industrial, more collective, cultural framework offered an antidote to the current fixation with the individual artist creating commodities for an elitist and speculative market. Linking his views on art with broader patterns of alienation in society that had developed in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, he summarized the situation as follows:

In our modern industrial civilization, with its lack of unity, its tendency to divide the various activities of life into separate grooves, the arts have been more isolated than ever before. They have been tied to narrow interests and have shown a shifting and broken pattern, which reflects the disunity of our age.⁴²⁹

Citing anonymous painters of signs, carriages, ships, and itinerant painters of portraits and shops who practiced their craft during the period from the seventeenth through to the mid-nineteenth century, Cahill emphasized that these “unexploited” artists “set down what they had to say with the means and materials at hand.”⁴³⁰ As is evident, he was rethinking the appropriate role for art in society. What seems to have been of greatest value to him was that this earlier tradition represented “the untutored expression of the common people made by them, and intended for their use and enjoyment, and is not an expression of the professional artist made for a small cultured class.”⁴³¹ Largely ignored in the US until the late 1920s, folk art was a native form of cultural expression that was not only able to furnish modern art with “an ancestry in the American tradition,” but one where art activity was a community enterprise.⁴³² Such insights would remain central to his thinking as the decade unfolded. As he later

⁴²⁸ The seminal text here is Van Wyck Brooks, “On Creating a Usable Past,” *The Dial* (11 April 1918), pp. 337–341. See also Platt, *Art and Politics*, pp. 31–47 and Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. 7–26.

⁴²⁹ Cahill, “American Resources in the Arts” (1939), *Art for the Millions*, p. 36.

⁴³⁰ Cahill, “Folk Art: Its Place in the American Tradition,” *Parnassus* 4.3 (March 1932), pp. 1–2; see also “Early Folk Art in America,” *CA* 11.4 (December 1932), pp. 255–271.

⁴³¹ Cahill, “Folk Art,” p. 2.

⁴³² *Ibid.*

contended during his directorship of the FAP, these earlier art traditions were “rooted firmly in community experience, and [were] kept alive through participation by the whole people.”⁴³³

For Cahill, the art of pre-industrial communities was not, however, to be appreciated merely for its social and practical utility. As John Vlach points out, his interest in these objects was equally the product of “his feeling for form and beauty.”⁴³⁴ Deeply anti-academic in his perspective, Cahill’s aesthetic convictions were informed on the one hand by tradition and, on the other, by contemporary modernism. As he stated in 1934 in a survey text of *Art in America* he co-edited with Barr, the artist must find a middle-ground between the “blind alley” of an introspective art-for-art’s sake and the tendency “merely to illustrate ideas.”⁴³⁵ “The significance of the work of art,” he contended, “must exist not only in its reaction to life *but also in its form*. For if it is true that contemporary life is the artist’s environment, it is also true that the great tradition of art is his inheritance. He neglects either at his peril” [*italics mine*].⁴³⁶ As this statement suggests, Cahill’s views on the aesthetic parameters for federal art were far more inclusive than those of the Section and Treasury project administrators. For example, the conservative formalism of Bruce and Watson, while ‘modern’ in the broadest sense of the term, was one that remained tied to the subject in art. Modernist formal experimentation, especially when taking the form of abstraction, was deemed to be exhausted and inappropriate. As Watson stated in an article tendentiously entitled “The Return to the Facts,” which appeared in the *Magazine of Art* in March 1936, abstract art “mossy as it is today, was incalculably valuable when it was alive and thriving a quarter of a century ago;” but “the pendulum swung too far toward purely intellectual painting.”⁴³⁷ Watson concluded that the pendulum always swings

⁴³³ Cahill, “American Resources,” p. 37.

⁴³⁴ Vlach, “Holger Cahill,” p. 155.

⁴³⁵ Cahill, *Art in America*, p. 102.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁷ Watson, “The Return to the Facts,” *MA* 29.3 (March 1936), pp. 147; 153; he reaches similar conclusions in “Realism Undefeated,” *Parnassus* 9.3 (March 1937), pp. 11-14; 37-38.

back and the current value of abstraction lay solely in that it “made possible the revolution which cleared the track for the realism of today.”⁴³⁸

However, what Cahill did share with other administrators was an interest in ‘native’ artistic expression (although such interest was marked by rather glaring differences in emphases), and he affirmed that “American art is declaring a moratorium on its debts to Europe, and is turning to cultivate its own garden.”⁴³⁹ Yet unlike many of his contemporaries, while he deemed such a “moratorium” to be a necessary stage in the development of American cultural expression, he did not see the need for artists to dismiss what they had learned from European formal lessons and maintained that “foreign influence is invariably at the heart of the native development.”⁴⁴⁰ In contradistinction to Barr, who by the 1930s was encouraging American artists to turn away from formal experimentation and the influence of Paris in order to rediscover “the traditional values of resemblance to nature and of subject matter,” Cahill did not suffer the same failure of nerve with respect to American modernism.⁴⁴¹ While believing there was “no health in introspection” and thereby whole-heartedly rejecting art-for-art’s sake as “a tattered banner which has blown down [in] the wind,” he affirmed that modernism “exerted a powerful and vitalizing influence upon contemporary American art.”⁴⁴²

Cahill’s approach to Americanism was thus decidedly more liberal and pluralistic than that of Bruce and Watson. Such differences, however, seem to have escaped some commentators. For example, writing in *New Masses*, Alexander bitterly denounced “the learned Mr. Cahill” for his association with 100 percentism and his ostensible preoccupation with native tradition that was given visual form in the Midwestern subject matter and conservative populist ideology of artists such as Benton, Curry and

⁴³⁸ Watson, “The Return to the Facts,” p. 147.

⁴³⁹ Cahill, *Art in America*, p. 101.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴¹ Barr, *Modern Works of Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1934), pp. 17; 16.

⁴⁴² Cahill, *American Painting and Sculpture, 1862-1932* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932), p. 22.

Wood.⁴⁴³ In the case of Benton, Alexander was particularly indignant that public walls were sacrificed to such “capitalist propaganda” which “totally evades the social responsibility of the mural painter.”⁴⁴⁴ Entirely missing the inclusivity and pluralism central to Cahill’s Americanism, Alexander tarred Cahill with the same brush as Thomas Craven (Benton’s critical defender), denouncing their “national chauvinism” and shared interest in cultural patrioteering.⁴⁴⁵ Because Alexander was writing during the Third Period, prior to the advent of the Popular Front, when the Party was condemning all forms of nationalism as cognate with fascist ideology, he ignored important differences between Cahill and Craven.⁴⁴⁶ Much of what Cahill admired about earlier American art was the particular social framework in which it was produced and received, *not* some narrow interest in “native” themes. My point here is that while Cahill was interested in fostering a national culture, he was not promoting the exclusionary and xenophobic version of an American aesthetic championed by vulgar nationalists such as Benton and Craven; nor, for that matter, was he an adherent of the more circumscribed model of the American Scene promulgated by Section administrators such as Bruce and Watson.

⁴⁴³ Alexander, “Mural Painting,” p. 28; for similar criticism from Alexander see his “Recent Magazines” and “Tom Benton” *NM* 15.4 (23 April 1935), pp. 25; 28; and “White Haired Boy,” p. 28. Benton enunciated his approach to Regionalism in a lecture he delivered at the JRC which was published as “Art and Nationalism,” *NM* 8.4 (May 1934), pp. 234-236. Schapiro tore his position to shreds in a scathing review of Benton’s autobiography *An Artist in America* (1937) in “Populist Realism,” *PR* 4 (December-May 1937-1938), p. 53.

⁴⁴⁴ Alexander, “Mural Painting,” p. 28.

⁴⁴⁵ While I do not wish to go into further detail regarding the battles over Americanism that animated the pages of magazines at mid-decade, Alexander’s vitriolic denunciation of “cultural patrioteering” in *New Masses* was matched by an acute and trenchant critique from Davis in *Art Front*. Touched off by an article in the 24 December 1934 issue of *Time* magazine that celebrated Benton and the Regionalist painters, the heated debate between Davis and Benton was recorded as follows: Davis, “The New York American Scene in Art,” *AF* 1.3 (February 1935), p. 6 [reprinted in part with commentary in *Art Digest* 9 (1 March 1935), pp. 4; 21]; Benton, “Answers to Ten Questions,” *Art Digest* 9 (March 15, 1935), pp. 20-21; 25 [reprinted in *AF* 1.4 (April 1935), pp. 4, 8]; and Davis, “Rejoinder to Thomas Benton,” *Art Digest* 9 (1 April 1935), pp. 12-13; 26. Davis and Benton were not alone in their battle; see also “A Letter from Curry,” *AF* 1.4 (April 1935), p. 2; Burck, “Benton Sees Red,” *AF* 1.4 (April 1935), pp. 5; 8; “Correspondence” [letters from Benton and Kainen], *AF* 1.5 (May 1935), p. 7, and Kirstein’s wonderful critique of Wood: “An Iowa Memling,” *AF* 1.6 (July 1935), pp. 6; 8. On the issue of Americanism see also Platt, *Art and Politics*, pp. 49-64.

⁴⁴⁶ Alexander’s critique of “national chauvinism” in art was levelled by Browder against the entire New Deal; see “What is Communism?” *NM* 15.6 (7 May 1935), p. 9.

Cahill's interest in developing a national culture cannot be understood in isolation from his unwavering commitment to the integration of such a culture within the everyday lives of the nation's citizens. It was this particular commitment, combined with his openness to modernism, that became the hallmark of his directorship of the FAP. However, this is not to say that Section administrators did not embrace similar social goals, even if they did not share Cahill's catholicity of taste. Like Cahill, Bruce and Watson fervently rejected the plutocracy of art and believed in a democratization of culture that would make art part of the everyday experience of the nation's citizens. Bruce's proposed Smithsonian Gallery of American Art was to have been "a liberal organization" that defined itself against the policies of "the little snob" MoMA and an interest in localism characterized the Section from the outset.⁴⁴⁷ Yet although Section administrators shared Cahill's interest in creating a healthy public attitude toward art and the artist and were, as Hemingway notes, "just as representative of New Deal cultural idealism as Cahill and the WPA Federal Art Project," their liberal ideology only remained in place so far as was consistent with a "high" standard of art and the general focus tended to be on the value of individual pictures reckoned on the basis of "quality."⁴⁴⁸ For Cahill, this emphasis on the merits of an individual picture was a nineteenth-century phenomenon, a collector's idea primarily, and one that had little or no relation to the purpose of the FAP in fostering a vital art movement. According to Cahill, issues of quality were subordinate to those of access, and genuine art movements found their strength not in individual "masterpieces," but in more broad-based efforts.

Cahill's ideas were largely influenced by the philosophy of Dewey. He explicitly acknowledged this influence in "American Resources in the Art," a speech he delivered on the occasion of the philosopher's eightieth birthday celebrations in 1939. Written when the art projects were facing their most vehement criticism to date, he cited Dewey and Mexican muralism as the "two most powerful forces" establishing

⁴⁴⁷ On Bruce's Smithsonian Gallery proposal see McKinzie, *The New Deal*, pp. 43-7.

⁴⁴⁸ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 81.

the character of the project.⁴⁴⁹ In retrospect, this speech also offers the most cogent rationale for federal art ever published, providing a clear and eloquent statement on how a democratically-accessible form of native cultural expression was to be achieved, at least within the context of the FAP. Enthusiastically endorsing Dewey's definition of art as "a mode of interaction" between people and their environment, Cahill viewed the project as a platform from which to translate the philosopher's ideas "into a program of action" and he repeatedly mobilized Dewey's concepts in defense of the project.⁴⁵⁰

Dewey was one of a number of liberal intellectuals centred around *The New Republic* who, as heirs to the tenets of Progressivism, shared an impulse toward a democratic collectivism that was hinged on the belief that America could be fundamentally transformed without having to endure the violence of revolution.⁴⁵¹ One of the central issues for Dewey was that gross economic inequality and the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the corporate capitalist elite undercut the principle of political equality supposedly embodied in a democratic system. Politically speaking, he accepted the inevitability of change and, while just as much a critic of the New Deal as he was of the CPUSA, believed that state power could be used to ameliorate this inequality while avoiding revolution and the concomitant change in the ownership of the means of production.⁴⁵² It is also significant that Dewey raises these same issues, at least implicitly, in relation to culture, and it was only in this sphere that he seemed to support a complete overthrow of the elite along with an overhauling of the relations of production.

⁴⁴⁹ Cahill, "American Resources," p. 38.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 34; 33.

⁴⁵¹ See Dewey's *Individualism Old and New* (New York: Minton Balch & Co., 1930) (which was published after serialization in *The New Republic*) and his *Liberalism and Social Action* (New York: Putnam's, 1935).

⁴⁵² Dewey published his statement "Why I Am Not a Communist" in *New Masses* in April 1934; responses included Paul Slater and Jack Librome, "Dewey, Russell, and Cohen, I & II: Why They are Anti-Communist," *NM* 12 (17 and 24 July 1934), page numbers removed and pp. 22-23 respectively; and Corliss Lamont, "John Dewey, Marxism and the United Front," *NM* 18 (3 March 1936), pp. 22-23.

Dewey's influential *Art as Experience* (1934) consistently aligns art with politics and locates "the aesthetic emotion" as a universal feature of life, positing the structure of aesthetic experience as active, pragmatic, and democratic.⁴⁵³ The central issue he addressed was that within contemporary culture art had been placed upon a "remote pedestal" and set apart from common experience.⁴⁵⁴ Like Veblen (with whom Cahill also studied), Dewey argued that good design should not be the sole privilege of the wealthy and should instead be made available to everyone.⁴⁵⁵ Severing the close connection that historically existed between the fine arts and daily life, art was now rendered "anemic to the mass of people."⁴⁵⁶ And being both rare and costly, it served as cultural capital or a mere "insignia of taste" for the leisured classes.⁴⁵⁷ Furthermore, Dewey insisted that it was the social context of this experience that needed to be rethought in order to achieve a true integration of art into life. Central to his political outlook was the development of a society that offered each person the experience of active participation in a shared culture.

That Cahill was deeply influenced by Dewey's ideas on cultural reform is evident in a speech he delivered at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1937. Decrying the use of art as "a luxury commodity for the select few" or as "an object of conspicuous display," Cahill argued:

The Project has been guided by the belief that in a democracy such as ours art should belong to everybody The opportunity to appreciate these works of art is not the exclusive birthright of a few people. It is largely the product of experience. In the past this experience has been limited to the few who had the opportunity to study and enjoy art. It is true that many of the art movements of the past century have spoken to comparatively few people but that is no fault of the mass of the people who had no voice in the matter and whose interest in art was not even invited.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵³ For an interpretation of Dewey's aesthetic thought during the 1930s see Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991).

⁴⁵⁴ Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; New York: Perigee Books, 1980), p. 7.

⁴⁵⁵ See Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of the Evolution of Institutions* (New York: Macmillan, 1899); and "Arts and Crafts" in Veblen, ed., *Essays in Our Changing Order* (1902; New York: Viking, 1943), pp. 194-199.

⁴⁵⁶ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 6.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁵⁸ "Mr. Cahill's Lecture Before the Metropolitan Museum of Art," New York City, 28 March 1937, RG 69, NARA.

Holding fast to Dewey's conviction that art possesses a "liberating and uniting power" and embracing his belief in the deeper social role of aesthetic experience, Cahill was intent upon using federal support as a means of re-establishing art as "part of the significant life of an organized community."⁴⁵⁹ Moreover, Dewey's liberal and inclusive stance that "the material for art should be drawn from all sources whatever" was echoed in Cahill's unequivocal support for artistic pluralism.⁴⁶⁰ As Cahill put it: "So far as technique and point of view are concerned the artist should not be held in any conventional channel."⁴⁶¹ In contradistinction to the indirect censorship exercised on the part of the art dealer or the collector (Cahill does not mention the other projects), the artist "should be free to range from the most conservative academicism to surrealism, abstraction and non-objectivism."⁴⁶²

Significantly, the perspective of modernists such as Davis, who remained a close friend of Cahill throughout the 1930s, also owed something to Dewey's philosophy.⁴⁶³ While Davis felt that Dewey's artistic theories were "unsatisfactory as a guide to action in the field of painting," the broader influence of Pragmatism and its climate of ideas should, as Diane Kelder argues, nonetheless be adequately acknowledged.⁴⁶⁴ That being said, I am, however, inclined to agree with John Lane that it was the social rather than the aesthetic aspects of Pragmatism that seem to have had an impact on Davis's thinking.⁴⁶⁵ In a published statement of 1935 expounding upon the standpoint of the Artists' Union, Davis cited *Art as Experience* to support the claim that "a work of art is a public act, or, as John Dewey says, an 'experience,'" and he recruited Dewey's model to argue for the imbrication of all art, including modernism, within the social

⁴⁵⁹ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, pp. 349; 7.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 344.

⁴⁶¹ Cahill, "American Resources," p. 35.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*

⁴⁶³ Jeffers suggests that Cahill may have curated Davis's exhibition at the Downtown Gallery in 1925, which is entirely plausible as both men were associated with Halpert; see Jeffers, "Holger Cahill," note 26, p. 11. During the early 1920s both Cahill and Davis wrote articles for the movie magazine *Shadowland* and in his reminiscences Cahill frequently speaks fondly of Davis, crediting him with having finally convinced him to accept the post as director of the FAP; see Cahill, "Reminiscences," pp. 336-337. That the two men remained close is suggested by the fact that in 1945, on the occasion of Davis's retrospective at MoMA, Cahill wrote a particularly laudatory review; see "Stuart Davis in Retrospect, 1945-1910," *Art News* (15-31 October 1945), pp. 24-25; 32.

⁴⁶⁴ Kelder, "Stuart Davis: Pragmatist of American Modernism," *Art Journal* 39.1 (Fall 1979), pp. 29-36.

⁴⁶⁵ Lane, *Art and Theory*, p. 34.

fabric.⁴⁶⁶ Following Dewey, Davis contended that art is never an “isolated phenomenon . . . rather, it is the result of the whole life experience of the artist as a social being.”⁴⁶⁷ From this Davis reaches the conclusion that all art, regardless of its form, cannot be “disassociated from the life experience and environment that produced it.”⁴⁶⁸

Dewey’s notion of what constituted aesthetic pleasure was also compatible with Davis’s approach to modernism. Dewey was sympathetic to modernist practices and his thinking on formal issues was indebted to his friendship with collector Alfred Barnes. In 1918 Barnes attended Dewey’s seminars at Columbia University to study the scientific method in education and it was Dewey’s belief in providing greater public access to art and education that led him to create the Barnes Foundation in 1922, naming Dewey as the Foundation’s first director of education in 1923.⁴⁶⁹ In a testament to the reciprocal nature of their friendship, Dewey stated in the preface to *Art as Experience* that his tutelage with Barnes was “a chief factor in shaping my own thinking about the philosophy of esthetics.”⁴⁷⁰ Significantly, while an art-for-art’s sake approach would not have accorded well with Dewey’s philosophy, he supported modernism and, relying upon Barnes’s *The Art in Painting* (1925) to justify his position, he viewed modernist art as something tied to the real world. As Dewey noted, while “works of abstract art are asserted by some not to be works of art at all,” he quoted Barnes by way of countering this perspective:

Reference to the real world does not disappear from art as forms cease to be those of actually existing things, any more than objectivity disappears from science when it ceases to talk in terms of earth, fire, air and water, and substitutes for these things the less easily recognizable ‘hydrogen,’ ‘oxygen,’

⁴⁶⁶ Davis, “The Artist Today: The Standpoint of the Artists’ Union,” *MA* 28.6 (August 1935), p. 478. It is evident from his personal notes that Davis read *Art as Experience*, but he made only the briefest of comments on Dewey; see Davis papers, 20 January 1937.

⁴⁶⁷ Davis, “The Artist Today,” p. 478.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁹ See Newman Robert Glass, “Theory and Practice in the Experience of Art: John Dewey and the Barnes Foundation,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 31.3 (Autumn, 1997), pp. 91-105. In 1929 Dewey and Barnes collaborated on a collection of essays published by the Barnes Foundation entitled *Art and Education*, which was re-issued in 1947. On Barnes see William Schack, *Art and Argyrol: The Life and Career of Dr. Albert C. Barnes*, rev. ed. (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1963).

⁴⁷⁰ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. viii.

‘nitrogen,’ and ‘carbon.’ . . . When we cannot find in a picture representation of any particular object, what it represents may be the qualities which *all* particular objects share, such as color, extensity, solidity, movement, rhythm, etc.⁴⁷¹

With respect to Davis then, not only did he and Dewey position modernism as something grounded in reality, but they both emphasized the importance of popular culture in the creation of a truly accessible art. As Dewey asserted, “the arts which today have most vitality for the average person are things he [sic] does not take to be arts: for instance, the movie, jazzed music [and] the comic strip.”⁴⁷² Rejecting the “museum conception” of culture, Dewey asserted that art should not be separated from “the objects and scenes of ordinary life” given that the masses find aesthetic enjoyment in their daily environment.⁴⁷³ As he affirmed, just as “the products of art should be accessible to all,” so too should “the material for art . . . be drawn from all sources whatever.”⁴⁷⁴ This line of argument, which posited not just a democratization of the audience for art, but which also depended upon a rapprochement between the categories of “art” and “popular culture,” would prove to be pivotal to Davis’s defense of modernism as form of realism. Furthermore, his refusal to conform to any rigid theoretical notions that relegated the artist to the role of social documenter or propagandist, despite his political allegiances to Marxism, suggest that his political perspective was also tempered by the lessons of Pragmatism. As Lane points out, the tenets of this philosophy, which “taught that man could act as a social engineer to political change, was very much an indigenous part of his background . . . [and] helps to explain why Davis found it easier to appreciate the optimistic and scientific political aspects of Marxism than the Party’s doctrinaire aesthetic theories.”⁴⁷⁵

As I have sought to demonstrate, Cahill’s stance with respect to the social utility of art was indebted to Dewey and, as the case of Davis suggests, such a stance

⁴⁷¹ Barnes as cited in *ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 344.

⁴⁷⁵ Lane, *Art and Theory*, pp. 34-35.

accommodated modernist form. Given that Cahill's cultural convictions were, again following Dewey, underpinned by notions of community and collectivity, and given that the project was intended to foster a "renaissance of democratic interest in American art which runs through every economic level of our society, from the richest to the poorest," the project offered a means of bringing modernism to a mass audience, particularly through the production of murals commissioned for public spaces. Indeed, under his direction modernists were given a considerable degree of latitude on the project and modernism was brought out of the ivory tower and into the street, so to speak. The question remains however, how did all of this sit with those on the left?⁴⁷⁶ While I have given some indication of the critical response on the part of Communists and fellow-travellers to the emphasis on native subject matter (and the attendant denunciation of Cahill as a "100 percenter"), I now want to address, more generally, the Party's shifting perspective on the New Deal and Americanism at mid-decade. Such shifts on the part of CPUSA had ramifications not only with respect to their evaluation of Roosevelt and the Democratic Party, but also had consequences for aesthetic matters, including the possibilities for a rapprochement between leftists politics and modernist aesthetics within the context of the FAP.

The CPUSA and the New Deal

For artists on the left the mid-1930s marked a moment of shifts and transitions. While the narrow and reactionary cultural patrioteering of artists such as Benton, Curry and Wood would never fit the bill for a leftist art, the Party's views on Americanism were, however, tempered following the shift to the Popular Front. Given the new latitude of its policies, the Party no longer indicted all forms of nationalism as reactionary and instead espoused a form of Americanism that established significant areas of overlap between New Deal ideology and Party discourse. As a result, by mid-decade the category of revolutionary art, so fiercely defended in the early 1930s, was becoming less distinguishable from other varieties of American Scene painting.

⁴⁷⁶ Cahill, "American Resources," p. 35.

Although many Communists and fellow-travellers initially viewed Roosevelt's interventionist stance as no more than a thinly-veiled move toward fascism, with the art projects commonly interpreted as sops to buy off the unemployed, they were obliged to rethink their attitude towards the New Deal by mid-decade. Following Hitler's rise to power and the suppression and defeat of the German Communist Party in 1933, the Soviet Union began to reappraise its hostile stance toward Western democracies. The subsequent shift in policy enunciated at the Comintern's Seventh World Congress in August 1935, known internationally as the Popular Front, was particularly significant in the US, not least because it allowed for a greater degree of discrimination between Roosevelt and his opponents.⁴⁷⁷ Although Communists kept up their attack on the New Deal throughout 1935 and 1936, insisting that the Democrats were as much the agents of business, fascism, and war as the Republicans, their strategy would be affected by the fact that 1936 was an election year. As organized labour and working-class voters swung towards the Democrats, the only way for the Party to create a united front against the reactionary forces of the Republicans was to tacitly abandon third-party politics at a national level and get behind Roosevelt. As Harvey Klehr asserts, between 1937 and 1939 the CPUSA, with Comintern endorsement, "traveled a long way down the path of 'revisionism.'"⁴⁷⁸

Despite their new support for the New Deal administration the Party still had reservations about Roosevelt, with the President's non-interventionist policy in Spain and constant cuts to WPA jobs generating vehement criticism.⁴⁷⁹ Many leftists and liberals (including Dewey) remained disappointed with the New Deal and continued to view the administration's provisions unfavourably. For example, while government patronage of the arts was deemed to be a step in the right direction, the FAP simply did not go far enough to alleviate the plight of the nation's cultural workers. As spokesperson for the Artists' Union, not to mention a savvy theoretician, it was Davis who offered the most acute and cogent analysis of the status of the artist vis-à-vis the

⁴⁷⁷ On the shift to the Popular Front see Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States*, pp. 83-105 and Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism*, pp. 186-206.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁴⁷⁹ For a standard period critique of cuts to the WPA which focuses on the arts projects see Theodore Draper, "Roosevelt and the WPA," *NM* 21 (22 December 1936), pp. 14-16.

New Deal. Writing in the August 1935 issue of the *Magazine of Art*, he approached the status of the artist in class terms and articulated a position that was entirely consonant with Party discourse — a position that would lead to him being denounced as a “Red” in the same magazine only a few months later.⁴⁸⁰ Offering readers “a factual description of the social-economic relation of the artist body to society,” Davis decried the ways in which artists, regardless of their approach to painting, were forced to work within “the framework of the middle class culture with a subject matter acceptable to that culture and marketing [their] product through channels set up by the middle class.”⁴⁸¹ Exploited by patrons, dealers, and museums alike, artists had little choice but to participate in a system that benefited everyone but them. Contending that artists, like labourers, were suffering from “the chaotic conditions in capitalist world society today,” he concluded that artists were at last recognizing their alignment with the working class.⁴⁸² Davis then turned his attention to the FAP, railing against issues such as wage cuts and the degradation of the “pauper’s oath.”⁴⁸³ It was, however, in the pages of *Art Front* that the project was most heartily lambasted and the magazine resounded with calls for better and more secure wages, social and unemployment insurance, artistic control over the works produced and, most importantly, permanent federal patronage for the arts.⁴⁸⁴

With the CPUSA’s transition to the Popular Front consequent attempts to adjust Comintern policy to American circumstances and overcome the image of an organization whose ideology was foreign to the country’s history and traditions were perhaps best epitomized when Browder adopted the slogan “Communism is the

⁴⁸⁰ Davis was described as a “Red” by Watson in “The Purpose of the Pittsburgh International,” *MA* 28.11 (November 1935), p. 644. Following the exchange between Davis and Watson earlier in the year over the unfairness of the Section’s employment policies, Watson had become increasingly critical of Communist and fellow-travelling artists.

⁴⁸¹ Davis, “The Standpoint of the Artists’ Union,” p. 477; 476. Hemingway and Monroe both offer insightful discussions of these issues; see Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, pp. 87-88 and Monroe, “Artists on the Barricades,” pp. 20-23.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 477.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 478.

⁴⁸⁴ “The Artist’s Struggle for Relief” and “For a Permanent Federal Art Project,” *AF* 1.1 (November 1934), pp. 6; 4.

Americanism of the twentieth century.”⁴⁸⁵ As the Party sought to put an end to its political isolation the pace of its policy redefinition quickened with the Comintern’s new-found enthusiasm for Roosevelt. The attendant shift toward Americanism was rendered even more apparent when the Party’s new coalition policy against fascism, announced in February 1938, was not incidentally retitled the “Democratic Front.”⁴⁸⁶ As one might imagine, this new political context incited distinct changes on the cultural front as well, as evinced by the fact that the *New Masses* first annual art exhibition in November 1938 was given the previously unthinkable title *We Like America*, which was based on Marxist literary critic Granville Hicks’s 1935 text *I Like America*, where he demonstrated that a Marxist perspective was not necessarily un-American. Significantly, not only did some 120 Communist and fellow-travelling artists now “like America,” but McCausland’s review of the exhibition singled out modernists such as Davis and Criss for special mention, addressing them alongside other “social” artists such as Gropper, Refregier, and Evergood.⁴⁸⁷ Now engaged in its own form of “cultural patrioteering,” the Party’s increasingly supportive stance towards notions of democracy and Americanism was accompanied by a new tolerance for stylistic diversity in aesthetic matters, opening up a critical space for modernists on the left.

⁴⁸⁵ On the CPUSA’s development of a “usable past” and Browder’s embrace of Americanism see Browder, “Concerning American Revolutionary Traditions,” *The Communist* 17.12 (December 1938), pp. 1079-1085; Klehr, et al., *The Soviet World of American Communism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 36-40; and Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, pp. 103-105. Objections to the slogan were raised from within the Party as well as by the Comintern and so Browder was obliged to discard it at the end of 1938; see Ottanelli, *The Communist Part of the United States*, p. 123.

⁴⁸⁶ On the Democratic Front see Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism*, pp. 207-222.

⁴⁸⁷ McCausland, “We Like America,” *NM* 29 (22 November 1938), p. 27.

Chapter Four

Davis, Brecht, and Léger: Towards a Radical Realism

As the CPUSA took broad strides toward embracing Roosevelt after mid-decade, the shift to the Popular Front, and subsequently to the Democratic Front, was also accompanied by a new sympathy for mainstream culture. As the Party sought to forge an alliance of progressive forces it began to revise its policies and bring them in line with those of a more popular Americanism, thereby enabling more open exchanges around cultural issues than during the Third Period. For example, if during the early 1930s proletarian art had been conceived as something like the inevitable period style of the proletariat, the embrace of a more diffuse 'People's Culture' and the abandonment of the rhetoric around proletarianism later in the decade meant that leftist critical discourses became more expansive. Just as the Party's literary critics modified the ideal of proletarian literature and began to embrace instead a more inclusive notion of 'social art,' so too did art critics begin to demonstrate a new willingness to evaluate more experimental aesthetic strategies in increasingly positive terms, even if their underlying commitment was to a more narrowly realist style and easily comprehensible message.⁴⁸⁸ Artistic modernism was not, however, a uniform category within the left and conflicts frequently erupted over aesthetic and theoretical divisions. This chapter will address some of those divisions. In particular, it will explore Davis's contention that his deployment of modernist practices constituted a form of realism compatible with Marxism. Bearing in mind that, as Esther Leslie puts it, Socialist Realism had "closed the door on the exchange between realism and modernism," I want to demonstrate how Davis continued to pursue such an exchange and, furthermore, that his claims for the socio-political import of this exchange was more plausible than is generally assumed.⁴⁸⁹

⁴⁸⁸ On the new stance adopted by the Party in relation to literature see Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 356-360.

⁴⁸⁹ Leslie, "Interrupted Dialogues," p. 138.

The degree of flexibility around the issue of modernism on the part of Communists and fellow-travellers distinguishes American leftists from their international counterparts who, by and large, were denigrating modernism and suppressing it as decadent and elitist. With the exception of the relations between Italian Fascism and Futurism (which were complex nonetheless), hostility toward modernist practice could hardly be denied by mid-decade on the part of both Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany.⁴⁹⁰ As the reactionary return to naturalism and Socialist Realism was accompanied by well-publicized attacks on modernists such as Shostakovich and Melnikov that appeared in the Soviet press in 1936 and the widespread confiscation and destruction of modernist artworks in Germany, culminating in the mounting of the Degenerate Art exhibition in Munich in 1937, America remained one of the few outposts where a rapprochement between modernist aesthetics and leftists politics was still a practicable option, albeit a marginal one.

As Hemingway asserts, for Communists and fellow-travelling artists and critics “the key problem of the period, at least in retrospect, seems to have been that of modernism.”⁴⁹¹ While many critics on the left, although still largely intolerant of anything that lacked a clearly legible subject, were prepared to accommodate modernist technical developments to some degree and were willing to accept European formal discoveries as a resource, they were less certain about modernism’s ability to carry socially-responsible content. It was this tension between aesthetic and political criteria that primarily characterized debates, as was evinced in discussions of the relative merits of Expressionism, Surrealism, and modernism more generally that animated the pages of *Art Front* and *New Masses*.

While *Art Front* was open to a plurality of artistic viewpoints (especially during Davis’s editorship in 1935) and served as a more accurate register of artistic divisions within the left than any other publication, *New Masses* increasingly featured a new modernist graphic style under art editor Crockett Johnson. The leading exponent of

⁴⁹⁰ On the Italian case see Emily Braun and Mario Sironi, *Italian Modernism: Art and Politics Under Fascism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁴⁹¹ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 121.

this style was Ad Reinhardt, a successful commercial artists and modernist painter who began contributing to the magazine in July 1936.⁴⁹² Designing a range of graphic material for the magazine including covers, cartoons, and diagrams using a Cubist montage technique similar to Davis's, he remained a contributor and occasional art editor until 1945, using both his own name and a number of pseudonyms. In terms of criticism, while the magazine had no regular art column at mid-decade, McCausland and von Wiegand each began to write a sequence of reviews commencing in April 1937.⁴⁹³ McCausland's stance was characterized by a broad inclusivity that did not associate any particular aesthetic with the creation of a socially valuable art. On the other hand, von Wiegand, who, like McCausland, also wrote for *Art Front*, was well-versed in European art developments and remained convinced of the need for a fusion between social themes and modernist innovations. Her contention that form was "the one and only true problem of western art" obviously proved significant for leftists in that she evaluated modernism in positive terms.⁴⁹⁴

'Abstraction' at the Whitney

A particularly lively exchange over modernist form was occasioned by the Whitney's exhibition *Abstract Painting in America*, held from 12 February to 22 March 1935. The "opening shot" took the form of Davis's introduction to the accompanying catalogue.⁴⁹⁵ As established previously Davis adhered to Communist political policy in the realm of social matters. As he stated in his notes, "the function of the artist is to express through the medium of art a positive view of social values. To do this he must choose a social viewpoint, which today can only be Marxism or historical materialism, because it is the only scientific social viewpoint."⁴⁹⁶ While he remained convinced that "the Communist parties of the world and the Comintern are completely representative

⁴⁹² While Reinhardt certainly fulfills the credentials of a modernist committed to leftist politics, he was not involved in the Mural Division of the FAP and so does not fall within the remit of this study. On Reinhardt and the left see the work of Corris as detailed in note 13.

⁴⁹³ McCausland wrote twenty-two reviews and von Wiegand contributed an additional fourteen. For a more detailed discussion of *New Masses* during this period see Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, pp. 105-112.

⁴⁹⁴ Von Wiegand, "Fine Arts," *NM* 24.3 (13 July 1937), p. 28.

⁴⁹⁵ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 45.

⁴⁹⁶ Davis papers, 1 October 1935.

of the cause of the workers” and would continue his activist role in the Union and the Congress until the end of the decade, as an artist committed to modernism he was unwilling to relinquish the technical developments of bourgeois art and effectively denied that the Party provided any insight or leadership in artistic matters.⁴⁹⁷ Moreover, he was adamant that an adherence to the formal developments associated with bourgeois society did not compromise alignment with the working class. As he stated: “A class’ culture may develop at a different rate than the society and be at [its] best as the class is decaying.”⁴⁹⁸ Davis was arguing that the technical developments of bourgeois painting were connected to other changes in modern society and thus constituted the most advanced formal tools at the artist’s disposal, what he termed “the highest product of the preceding epoch.”⁴⁹⁹ He continued: “to define [modernist] works in terms of the bankruptcy of a moribund capitalist society is the most stupid blunder.”⁵⁰⁰ In fact, to ignore the achievements of European developments was not just reactionary, but undemocratic.⁵⁰¹ “On what basis,” he demanded, “can democracy be preserved and extended except through the preservation and extension of the highest achievements of humanity.”⁵⁰² As is evident, Davis’s commitment to modernism was, in many respects, as exclusive as that of his opponents. He was insistent that the “simple fact is that modern and abstract art are the only contemporary expression in painting.”⁵⁰³

Constituting the first major museum exhibition of abstraction mounted in the US, *Abstract Painting in America* was comprised of 134 works by sixty-five artists and served as a survey of developments since the Armory Show of 1913. Ranging from paintings by the first generation of modernists such as Weber, Arthur Dove, and Marsden Hartley, to contemporary paintings by Browne, Gorky, Greene, Knaths, and Matulka, the exhibition was greeted with critical reservation. Writing in the *New York Evening Sun* McBride was one of the few to offer unconditional praise. In terms of

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 27 July 1937.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10 January 1938.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18 December 1937.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 20 June 1937.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 19 June 1937.

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*, 18 December 1937.

⁵⁰³ Davis to Biddle, 1 July 1940, Biddle papers, AAA, Reel P17.

social content he deemed the works to be both “attractive and usable;” moreover, modernist form had a particular “native” resonance that “all those who pretend to a pride in their country should immediately investigate.”⁵⁰⁴ Jewell, on the other hand, admitted in his review for *The New York Times* that the show made for “a very entertaining, bright spectacle,” but proceeded to contrast the predominance of “decorative patterns” on view, which were found wanting, with the formal simplification achieved in the work of Hopper and Burchfield, which “decidedly partakes of abstraction in the essential sense.”⁵⁰⁵ Moreover, as the art critic at *Parnassus* noted, with the exception of a few painters, namely Davis, Gorky, Graham, and Knaths, the “American painters who entered the field of Cubism or its late developments have fallen far behind, failing to keep pace with the rapid advancement of the foreign painters who are carrying the banners of abstraction in the present day.”⁵⁰⁶ Yet as Watson asserted in the *Magazine of Art*, European formal developments had exerted a significant effect upon American art and such effects were charted “extremely well” by the Whitney.⁵⁰⁷ He even paid tribute to Davis. Although he had “never amused himself by tossing bouquets in the direction of Mr. Stuart Davis as a painter,” he praised his “knowing and experienced” catalogue essay.⁵⁰⁸ Not everyone agreed on the merits of this essay however, and ironically the most acute criticism of Davis’s text was issued in the pages of *Art Front*.

Given that the Whitney significantly shortened Davis’s essay and removed its more overtly political elements, the text as published is a necessarily brief and relatively innocuous statement that makes only faint allusions to a correlation between modernist form and leftist politics. Confronted with the difficult task of overcoming widespread skepticism about the relevance of modernism to society, especially during a period of protracted crisis, Davis began his essay by suggesting that it was the Armory Show that initiated a “revolution of aesthetic opinion.”⁵⁰⁹ Having established the artist’s

⁵⁰⁴ McBride, “Abstract Art in America,” *New York Evening Sun*, 16 February 1935.

⁵⁰⁵ Jewell, “On the Abstract Trail,” *NYT*, 17 February 1935.

⁵⁰⁶ D. S. “Current Exhibitions,” *Parnassus* 7.3 (March 1935), p. 21.

⁵⁰⁷ Watson, “Abstract Painting in America,” *MA* 28.3 (March 1935), p. 168.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁹ Davis, *Abstract Painting in America* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1935), n. p.

“right to free expression” and loosening the Academy’s “stranglehold on critical art values,” the Armory Show demonstrated that art “is not and never was a mirror reflection of nature;” rather, it “is an understanding and interpretation of nature.”⁵¹⁰ As Cézanne had made clear, images are “expressions which are parallel to nature and parallel lines never meet.”⁵¹¹ As such, Davis suggested that painters should study the “material reality” of their medium, especially given that a painting is “a two-dimensional plane surface and the process of making a painting is the act of defining two-dimensional space on that surface.”⁵¹²

An important critique of Davis’s position came from the Communist activist and writer Clarence Weinstock. Having travelled to Paris in the 1920s to study art, Weinstock subsequently decided that his main interest was in criticism. It was upon his return to the US that he associated himself with the CPUSA.⁵¹³ Taking over from Joseph Solman as managing editor of *Art Front* in January 1937 (a post he held until the magazine folded at the end of that year), he later became an editor of *Masses and Mainstream* (the successor to *New Masses*) using the pseudonym Charles Humboldt. As Monroe has commented, “nothing delighted him more than crossing literary swords with other critics” and his response to Davis’s essay, entitled “Contradictions in Abstraction,” was published in the April issue of *Art Front*.⁵¹⁴ Although Weinstock was not anti-modernist, he took issue with Davis’s particular formulation of painting as a “two-dimensional medium” and argued that modern art thus defined was “founded on a limited definition of painting in general.”⁵¹⁵ According to Weinstock, Davis’s definition was too reductive in that it over-emphasized painting’s materiality such that form “becomes like so much monopoly capital in which the society of art is sacrificed.”⁵¹⁶

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*

⁵¹² *Ibid.*

⁵¹³ On Weinstock see Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 45.

⁵¹⁴ Monroe, “The Artists’ Union of New York,” p. 162.

⁵¹⁵ Weinstock [Humboldt], “Contradictions in Abstraction,” *AF* 1.4 (April 1935), p. 7.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*

More damning yet was Weinstock's assertion that Davis's suggestion of "parallel systems of art and nature" constituted an "anti-dialectical definition" of painting.⁵¹⁷ If art and nature were non-convergent, how could any analogy exist between the two unless "the systems of art and nature were not parallel but continuous, unless there were a dynamic relation between the experience of events and aesthetic experience?" For Weinstock, the major issue that Davis failed to address was that of meaning, "the element in terms of which nature and art are united."⁵¹⁸ By failing to acknowledge the central place of meaning Davis seemed to place all his faith in the spectator, "on a naïve hope that he will make the same interpretation of the color forms that the artist did."⁵¹⁹ But as Weinstock warns, "No meaning is the equivalent of *any* meaning [and] the painting is open to any ascription of meaning that anyone wishes to give it, reactionary, sur-realist, mystical, rebellious."⁵²⁰ Such arbitrariness was not acceptable in the contemporary world given that the experience of the modern artist, and more specifically the revolutionary artist, included "not only the forms of nature, but the meaning of events."⁵²¹

Davis's reply to Weinstock appeared in *Art Front* the following month. Conceding that there were limitations to his Whitney essay due to its enforced brevity and that his use of the phrase "parallel to nature" was incorrect "from the standpoint of philosophical usage," the crux of his rebuttal is as follows:

. . . the definition was meant to be a description of the material quality of a painting and did not by intention imply that because the painting was a quality distinct from its sources, it had no connection with them. Further, it did not by intention imply that the two-dimensional space definition was an act undirected by social purpose.⁵²²

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*

⁵²² Davis, "A Medium of Two Dimensions," p. 6.

Indeed, his invocation of the term “parallel” may well have been intended to emphasize that art was not a reflection of external reality but had its own means of engaging the world, means that were dependent upon the material reality of painting.

Strangely, Weinstock seems to have Davis uncharacteristically on the back foot here, and his response lacked the clarity and conviction typical of his writing. Davis, after all, consistently denied that modernism was aligned with an art-for-art’s sake outlook and in direct contradistinction to non-objective artists he not only foregrounded the connections between painting and the world around it, but he consistently underscored the meaning such connections had in socio-political terms. His borrowing of the term “parallel” from Cézanne in order to characterize the relations between “abstract art” and “nature” was thus misleading given that he ardently defended modernism as a form of realism and frequently employed the term “analogy” to describe the relationship between elements in the world and those in his paintings. For example, the lingering ties between “art” and “nature” were at least evident in the six canvases he exhibited in the Whitney exhibition, such as *Saltshaker* (1931) (fig. 46). While the realms of “art” and “nature” are indeed separate, they are not rendered strictly non-convergent. As is characteristic of his Cubist visual idiom, objects in the three-dimensional world have been translated onto the two-dimensional surface of the canvas.

Given Davis’s position on the realism of his work he had set himself a challenge in writing the Whitney essay, which was intended to serve as a defense of abstraction. Significantly, Davis recognized that the word “abstract” was “certainly not the best term to describe the many and diverse forms of modern painting to which it has been applied,” but on this occasion it was unavoidable, if misleading.⁵²³ The difficulty of his endeavour was further exacerbated by his own rejection of the term “abstract” as a suitable label for his work given its associations with an idealist perspective on modernist form, as was attested to by his decision to remove the word from the title of the mural he previously executed for the MoMA exhibition in 1932. Davis was not a

⁵²³ Davis, “Abstract Painting Today,” p. 121.

champion of abstraction in its non-objective idiom and the use of the word “abstract” introduced a degree of terminological imprecision to his Whitney essay that complicated matters considerably. Moreover, as Weinstock was quick to point out, Davis’s use of the term “parallel” in this context merely obfuscated the all-important relationship between the “real” and the “abstract” that Davis so staunchly insisted upon in his own work.

Davis’s unfortunate use of the term “parallel” also accounts for Weinstock’s claim that his definition of painting was “anti-dialectical.” However, dialectics was central to Davis’ theoretical and methodological armature and his understanding of the concept is deserving of further elaboration, especially given the scant degree of attention this aspect of his work has received in existing scholarship. For example, while Whiting discusses Davis’s painting of the 1930s in terms of a dialectical method, her analysis is characterized by generalization.⁵²⁴ In contrast, Lane’s treatment of Davis’s engagement with dialectics, while brief, offers a number of insights that I now want to pursue.⁵²⁵ As Lane convincingly observes, “when Davis applied the mode of thesis, antithesis, synthesis to his theory of formal procedures, he used it to help himself think in terms of contrasting and integrating formal elements to achieve what he called ‘a unity of opposites.’”⁵²⁶

From the mid-1930s onwards Davis wrote in his notes about the dialectical nature of his practice with a marked degree of frequency and he continued to develop an increasingly nuanced understanding of the concept.⁵²⁷ While it would prove difficult to reconstruct the precise sources from which Davis culled his knowledge of dialectics, his personal papers demonstrate that, in addition to his familiarity with

⁵²⁴ See Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*, pp. 65-97, especially 75-76.

⁵²⁵ See Lane, *Art and Theory*, pp. 36-39.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁵²⁷ See, for example, Davis papers, “Drawing and Dialectics,” 9 April 1937; “Realism in Painting is Generalized by Opposition in Space,” 3 July 1937; “Dialectics of Esthetic Form,” 7 August 1937; “Dialectical Realism,” 17 April 1938, “Dialectic Thinking,” 6 August 1938; and “The Dialectic Concept of Reality,” 19 August 1939. Although not acknowledged in standard accounts, his commitment to dialectics continued into the 1940s, especially in his attempts to come to terms with the new formal and theoretical challenges posed by the work of Mondrian.

Marx, Engels and Lenin, he had also read Georgi Plekhanov and M. Shirokov's *A Textbook of Marxist Philosophy* (1937), a book Davis summarized in some fifteen pages of notes.⁵²⁸ Shirokov's manual begins with a discussion of "What is Dialectic?" that clearly finds its way into Davis's thinking. As Shirokov affirms, dialectical thought — "the study of things in their relations and in process of development and change" — is a form or *realism* "derived from the living nature of reality" and is "*not* an abstract system of logic" [*italics mine*].⁵²⁹ During this period the Marxists Critics Group (in existence from 1936 to 1939) was circulating important texts such as Plekhanov's *Art and Social Life* (1937); Milton Brown's *Painting of the French Revolution* (1938); and Mikhail Lifshitz's *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx* (1938).⁵³⁰ From 1937 to 1939 the Group also published briefer texts in the nine issues of the journal *Dialectics* it put out irregularly. Featuring Plekhanov's "Historical Materialism and the Arts," a bibliography of texts in English on dialectics, along with Brown's "The Marxist Approach to Art," Davis was almost certainly among the readership as he is quoted praising Brown's pamphlet on the French Revolution in issue six of the journal. Brown did not adopt a vulgar Marxist position and his assertion that art "has a character and a development parallel to and harmonious with the general stream of culture, and yet peculiar to itself" was consonant with Davis's thinking on aesthetic matters.⁵³¹ Like Davis, Brown did not reject modernist technical developments as inherently bourgeois and he too insisted that "changes in society change [art's] function:" "Thus a painting may at one time be an expression of religious piety and an object of worship, and at other times an expression of a personal aesthetic, or of sensual indulgence, or a call to revolutionary action."⁵³² Brown was sympathetic to the artist's need to assimilate the lessons of modernism in order to

⁵²⁸ M. Shirokov, *A Textbook of Marxist Philosophy*, trans. John Lewis (London: Victor Gollancz, 1937). On this text see Davis papers, 20 February 1940; on Plekhanov see 24 November 1935 and 28 March 1936.

⁵²⁹ Shirokov, *Textbook*, pp. 10-11.

⁵³⁰ Georgi Plekhanov's *Art and Social Life* was reviewed by William Phillips, *AF* 3.3-4 (May 1937), pp. 23-24.

⁵³¹ Milton Brown, "The Marxist Approach to Art," *Dialectics* 2 (1937), p. 24.

⁵³² *Ibid.*

express a “revolutionary content” and it is unsurprising that Davis warmly welcomed his writing as “A most valuable contribution to the critical literature on art.”⁵³³

It is also entirely likely that Davis had previously read the widely popular and frequently translated books authored by Nikolai Bukharin, *The ABC of Communism* (1919) and *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* (1921), with the latter containing an entire chapter on “Dialectic Materialism.” However, despite his political fellow-travelling, Davis did not endorse Stalinist aesthetics and more than once used the phrase “mechanical materialism” as a term of abuse.⁵³⁴ As Davis noted, this approach reduced art to its content and ignored the significance of form and its specific basis in material reality. While “class consciousness must . . . be the guide to the value of a work of art, it is not sufficient to evaluate a painting in terms of its social ideology.”⁵³⁵ He insisted that “its technical ideology is also involved and must be rated.”⁵³⁶ Thus, in contradistinction to Plekhanov, who was among the first Soviet Marxists to discuss art and literature in a sustained and systematic fashion, Davis did not subscribe to a reductive reflectionist theory of cultural production (or to a reflectionist epistemology either). For Plekhanov, who took to describing the “allegedly artistic experiments” of the Cubists as “Rubbish Cubed,” modernist painting was a product of bourgeois society and so must be rejected.⁵³⁷ As he explained: “Just as an apple tree *must* produce apples and a pear tree pears, so must the artist who adopts the bourgeois standpoint be against the working-class movement. Art, in periods of decadence, ‘*must*’ itself be decadent.”⁵³⁸

The first mention of “dialectics” in Davis’s notes occurred in October 1935 as he attempted to clarify the relations between a “social objective” and the “expression of

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, p. 30. Hemingway also notes that Davis’s recommendation was quoted in an advertisement in E. Siegmeister’s *Music and Society*, published by the Group in 1938; see Hemingway, “Fictional Unities,” note 34, p. 116. For more on the Marxist Critics Group see Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 113.

⁵³⁴ Davis papers, 9 March 1938; 17 August 1939. See also 12 April 1937 and 9 June 1937.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*, 31 March 1937.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁷ Georgi Plekhanov, *Art and Social Life* (1937; London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1953), p. 216.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

the same” through art.⁵³⁹ According to Davis, the former “requires clarification on the philosophy of life,” while the latter “requires clear understanding of the medium,” with the key point being that, taken together, “these two requirements are basic and form a unit which makes the work of art.”⁵⁴⁰ He articulated his philosophy of life in unequivocally Marxist terms: it was one in which “it is necessary to see a class struggle in society” and to recognize that “the workers have arrived at that degree of development where conscious and scientific thought for their social direction must take the place of superstition and traditions.”⁵⁴¹ In terms of aesthetics Davis remained unwavering in his belief that artists had a crucial role to play in the class struggle so long as they were prepared “to admit the dynamic and moving quality of life” and dispense with the kind of “slave psychology” that made “artists feel that world events are beyond any power of theirs to change.”⁵⁴² The question remains, however, how did Davis conceive of his formal enterprise, particularly his commitment to modernist form, as dialectical?

In a passage entitled the “Dialectics of Esthetic Form” Davis suggested that “By dialectics is meant the process by which esthetic form develops. This dialectical process develops through contradiction in space.”⁵⁴³ The central “contradiction” for Davis was that between the two-dimensional spatial system of the artistic support and the three-dimensional spatial system of the world exterior to it. Furthermore, the dialectical elements, “whose contradictory simultaneous existence creates the esthetic form” were “length,” “area,” and “color-tone.”⁵⁴⁴ The dialectical method of artistic production was thus achieved through “the observation of the dialectical opposition, which develops between these elements in each part of space and time, as the form develops.”⁵⁴⁵ In other words his pictures were constructed from the “dialectical opposition or a change in position in space and of tonal opposition (which must be regarded as the junction of two different spatial systems) so that really the whole thing

⁵³⁹ Davis papers, 1 October 1935.

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴² *Ibid.*

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*, 7 April 1937.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

becomes a matter of three-dimensional space definition in two-dimensional terms.”⁵⁴⁶ Moreover, as Lane has observed, each formal element possessed its own absolute real value while simultaneously being interrelated with all the others to become “a relative part of the whole picture.”⁵⁴⁷ Similarly, the work of art “is absolute unto itself but relative to nature.”⁵⁴⁸ Davis summarized the effect, which approximated the way in which nature is seen as a continuous series of discrete views, as follows: “Thus, in the observations which are made of nature in the process of picture making, a continuous process of observations of limited fields in nature is approximated in continuous spatial-tonal analogies. Each field of observation has an absolute total value which is composed of relative parts. And each field becomes a relative part of the whole picture.”⁵⁴⁹ Maintaining that “the dialectical method is the only realistic method for making art” and labelling his work “Dialectical Realism,” Davis’s approach to painting throughout the 1930s suggests that he “believed he was painting images that described the dialectical character of reality and were, consequently, truly realistic.”⁵⁵⁰

Returning to Davis’s Whitney essay, the spectre of “meaning” raised by Weinstock is a thornier issue yet, and one that was almost invariably broached by critics on the left. For while Davis ardently rejected the charge that modernist form was necessarily idealist, a position with political resonance in that it foregrounded an art grounded in real, material experience, he did not want his painting to function as a form of propaganda and refused, with few exceptions, to address political issues directly in his work. Instead, it was both the production of art for a mass audience, especially in the form of the mural, and the modernism of his technique that bore the burden of radicalism. Given Davis’s views on the ways in which the “social dialectic” was characterized by a reciprocal relation in which “Man interacts with his environment [such that] it acts on him and he acts on it,” art could not merely fulfill the function of reflecting nature — it had to engage with it more dynamically.⁵⁵¹ As he opined,

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 9 April 1937.

⁵⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 17 April 1938; Lane, *Art and Theory*, p. 39.

⁵⁵¹ Davis papers, 6 August 1938.

although certain critics “identify the human realism of Marxism with naturalism in painting,” their position was fundamentally flawed because it “conceives art as a static non-historical category. It assumes that the pre-photographic function of painting which was to act as a mirror to nature is its permanent function.”⁵⁵² Yet as Davis points out, dialectical thinking insists upon “the acceptance of a reality which is constantly changing,” thereby making modernism — the only art which “celebrates the scientific viewpoint [and] seeks to advance humanity through objective understanding and control of nature and society” — a truly radical form of artistic expression geared towards the needs of contemporary society.⁵⁵³

Pursuing the question of “meaning” from another angle, Davis was also able to refute recurring claims that modernist form was an elitist and bourgeois from a decidedly Marxist standpoint. The argument goes like this:

The proletariat are a rising class who are coming into power, not as paupers, but on a scale of living never before achieved. They are taking over a world in which the means of production, the transportation, the education, the cultural facilities are on the highest plane in history. The proletariat revolts to gain the right to enjoy and develop these things, not to destroy . . . them. And in the special field of painting this same high development has taken place Modern art, — abstract art, is part of the high accomplishment of bourgeois society which will not be negated but used and developed by the proletariat.⁵⁵⁴

While “Modern art” was a product of bourgeois society, it was one of the most progressive aspects of culture to have emerged within a reactionary social and political context. In contrast to Weinstock, who wanted modernist innovations integrated into a revolutionary art with a didactic message, he regarded such innovations as inherently progressive. For Davis, the trouble lay not with modernist form in and of itself, but with the failure of society to incorporate art into the broader cultural scheme. However, such integration was not to be accomplished by giving painting the task of illustration or propaganda. According to Davis, “The role of the cultural leaders of the

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*, 10 January 1938.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, 6 August 1938; 10 January 1938.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

emerging class, the workers, is to bring to that class a full participation in contemporary culture so that this class will be fully prepared to seize power and establish that new order of society which will be more full, not less full, than the present one.”⁵⁵⁵ Whether or not one is entirely convinced by Davis’s position, he was seeking to create an art that took advantage of modernist formal developments but which was grounded in contemporary experience and which was accessible to the masses.

Radical Realism

As Brian O’Doherty has commented, Davis’s claim to be a realist is usually considered no more than an eccentricity.⁵⁵⁶ For example, an exhibition pamphlet written for the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2005 asserts that Davis’s modernism antagonistically “squared off” with the realist tradition, while Bruce Weber argues that Davis came to wholeheartedly “reject realism” by the 1930s.⁵⁵⁷ This pitting of modernism against realism in Davis’s oeuvre is an oversimplification, one which reflects the ways in which these positions have, for the most part, hardened into oppositions within the broader history of twentieth-century American art. But as Davis had already remarked in 1938: “Some critics have sought to place abstract art in contradiction to an art with social content: Such a thesis is superficial and incorrect.”⁵⁵⁸ However, in order to better understand the ways in which Davis’s painting practice was underpinned by nuanced exchanges between realism and modernism and, furthermore, how this was consistent with a leftist political perspective, I now want to look more closely at Davis’s formal repertoire and the claims he made for it.

To begin with Davis’s formal vocabulary is grounded in Synthetic Cubism, and Milton Brown deployed the remarkably useful term “Cubist-Realism” to describe his

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁶ O’Doherty, *American Masters*, p. 50.

⁵⁵⁷ *Stuart Davis and American Abstraction: A Masterpiece in Focus* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2005), n. p.; Weber, *Stuart Davis’ New York*, p. 10.

⁵⁵⁸ Davis, “FAP and the Social Education of the Artist” [unpublished essay] in Kelder, *Stuart Davis*, p. 164.

canvases of the late 1920s and early 1930s.⁵⁵⁹ Despite Brown's early acknowledgement of the central relation between the modernist formal lessons of Cubism and the political imperatives of realism manifested in Davis's work, few commentators address the political resonance of his engagement with Cubist devices. As Lowery Stokes Sims observes, Davis scholars have tended to assess his art and politics in isolation, dealing with these aspects of his career separately, as is evident in statements such as that by Karen Wilkin that Davis "insisted on scrupulously separating his painting and his political activism."⁵⁶⁰ This approach critically misconstrues Davis's efforts, especially during the 1930s. Moreover, while Whiting attempts to overcome "the apparent incompatibility" between his painting and his politics, she misreads the character of their fundamental *compatibility* by making it a function of "the nature of his Marxism," which she deems to be that of "an independent socialist thinker," thereby undercutting his commitment to Communist politics (if not to Party aesthetics) to make room for his modernism.⁵⁶¹ In fact, a reconsideration of his approach during this period unmistakably demonstrates the interconnectedness of art and politics, and it is to his use of a Cubist idiom that I shall turn first.

As demonstrated earlier, Renaissance picturing, with its idealist emphasis upon the stabilizing and hierarchical ordering of space, was profoundly ideologically-charged and was, in the words of Hemingway, "as much a determinant of the way the world is perceived as an effect of it."⁵⁶² Through an application of the lessons of Cubism, in particular the rejection of linear perspective, the fragmented treatment of the pictorial plane, and the collaging of disparate elements, Davis's paintings assault what Eugene Lunn refers to as "the seemingly immovable 'facticity' and permanence" of the

⁵⁵⁹ The label "Cubist-Realism" was coined by Brown in 1946 to describe the austere, sharply delineated style now known as Precisionism. Resembling Purism in some respects, Cubist-Realism was defined by a "simplification of forms down to fundamentals" and he applied the label to the work of Davis and Matulka produced during the early 1930s; see Brown, *American Painting From the Armory Show to the Depression* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), pp. 107-108; 113-114.

⁵⁶⁰ Sims, *American Painter*, p. 56; Wilkin, *The Amazing Continuity: The Drawings of Stuart Davis* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992), p. 24.

⁵⁶¹ Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*, pp. 67; 68.

⁵⁶² Hemingway, "The Realist Aesthetic," p. 104.

exterior world, instead encouraging a more dynamic sense of its human production and reproduction.⁵⁶³ As Lunn convincingly asserts:

With Cubism, modern art and modern science — freed of nineteenth-century positivism — draw together. The Cubist juxtaposition and dynamic collision of different angles and moments in space and time suggest . . . the relativistic abandonment of the fixed and absolute truths, or a monolithic objective order seen from a stationary point outside the observer.⁵⁶⁴

Moreover, while Cubism has, for the most part, been associated with the type of modernist formalism championed by Greenberg et al., it could simultaneously, and significantly for Davis's purposes, be construed *not* as an autonomous artform whose efforts were directed inward, but as a form of realism, one adequate to an engagement with contemporary social reality.⁵⁶⁵

Certainly Davis saw things this way and he insisted that "To talk about social content painting in vague terms, without reference to modern technique is to mislead, because it leaves the aspiring social content artist without a *realistic method* of expression as developed by Cubism."⁵⁶⁶ Furthermore, while this method is hinged upon a reconfiguration of the three-dimensional world onto the two-dimensional painting support, thereby underscoring the dynamics of *re*-presentation while adhering to the modernist logic of flaunting the specificities of the medium itself, it also demonstrates that the world of objects external to painting is inseparable from the shifting and

⁵⁶³ Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 47.

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁵⁶⁵ On the institutionalization of Cubism according to this model and attempts to dislodge it from a strictly formalist framework see Cottington, *Cubism and Its Histories*, pp.190-196. Significantly, the lessons of Cubism were utilized by some of the Soviet Constructivists and, as Ruth Bohan pointed out more than twenty-five years ago, during the development of his *Egg Beater* series (1927-1928) Davis demonstrated a marked, if still largely unexplored, interest in El Lissitzky's *Prouns*, which he encountered a year earlier at the *International Exhibition of Modern Art* organized by the Société Anonyme at the Brooklyn Museum. Due to the limitations of space it is not, unfortunately, possible to address this; see Ruth Bohan, *The Société Anonyme's Brooklyn Exhibition: Katherine Drier and Modernism in America* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1982), p. 125 and John Angeline, "Davis, Dreier, Lissitzky: New Thoughts on an Old Series," <http://www.Brickhaus.com/amoore/magazine/Davis.html>. See also Jennifer Gross, ed., *The Société Anonyme: Modernism for America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press /Yale University Art Gallery, 2006).

⁵⁶⁶ Davis papers, 12 January 1937.

multi-dimensional perception of it. As Lunn suggests, “While the symbolists and impressionists had exploited metaphor and color to aestheticize reality, the Cubists more directly assaulted the notion of art as leading an independent hermetic existence insulated from the outer visible world.”⁵⁶⁷ At the same time, the incorporation of objects culled from the material environment — a strategy characteristic of Synthetic Cubism — served as a manifestation that art was not merely a mirror of the world external to painting, but an aspect of reality in and of itself. Art, like social reality, was a dynamic and changeable construction of varying objects and viewpoints, thus implying that Cubist procedures could potentially be exploited within a politically committed realist practice. Granted, it was not the realism of the nineteenth century, but a realism that suited what Leslie aptly describes as “the dynamic, fractured, simultaneist, montaged, complex reality of modern life.”⁵⁶⁸

Brecht

Davis was not alone in carrying forward these arguments and other leftists were developing a similar approach to realism within the context of Communist cultural debate. Although discussions around realism had by now ossified in the Soviet Union with the consolidation of Stalin's rule and the codification of Socialist Realism as the only officially endorsed aesthetic, international discussions around realism continued to provide a critical space for the enunciation of alternatives. So while the influence of the Comintern ensured that it was the Soviet model that served as a benchmark for consideration, there was opposition to the narrowness of what amounted to Moscow criteria, and other, more nuanced notions of realism were promulgated across the leftist cultural field throughout this period.

The attempt on the part of Davis to fuse the social concerns of realism with modernist practices has affinities with ideas being developed by Brecht, who was similarly committed to radically re-thinking the realist project rather than abandoning it altogether. Although Brecht's work was principally in the theatre, it was accompanied

⁵⁶⁷ Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism*, p. 49.

⁵⁶⁸ Leslie, “Interrupted Dialogues,” p. 137.

by theoretical reflections on the question of realism more broadly and, as Alex Callinicos suggests, it “represents perhaps the most sustained attempt to unite aesthetic modernism and revolutionary Marxism.”⁵⁶⁹ From the late 1920s onwards Brecht’s approach, which came to constitute the major left-wing opposition to Socialist Realism in the inter-war period, emphasized the need to abandon outmoded traditional forms and engage modernist techniques, even those culled from bourgeois culture.⁵⁷⁰ Unlike Lukács, whose more conventional aesthetic was not synonymous with the Stalinist model but whose common enemy was modernism, Brecht advocated a hybrid art that critically addressed contemporary reality, but which did so on the basis of avant-garde technical innovation. As John Willett asserts, at the root of Brecht’s opposition to Lukács was the latter’s “undue reverence for tradition coupled with a failure to see how closely form *and* content are bound together for any artist, so that new contents require new forms.”⁵⁷¹

Although it is difficult to assess the degree of Brecht’s influence in the US during the 1930s he was not unknown, with fellow-travelling artists such as Jack Levine singling out his work as “a great motivating idea of art and politics” from which he learned more “than almost anything else.”⁵⁷² Brecht’s debate with Lukács over the viability of modernism, which served as a focal point within the broader context of discussions around realism, was familiar to some American leftists. For example, Lukács’s polemical essay “Propaganda or Partisanship” (1932) — in which he argued that, in contradistinction to Brecht, modernist devices do not clarify relationships but rather further obfuscate them — was published in the April-May issue of *Partisan Review* in

⁵⁶⁹ Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), p. 24.

⁵⁷⁰ On Brecht see John Willett, *Brecht in Context* (1984; London: Methuen, 1998), especially “Brecht and the Visual Arts,” pp. 143-164; and Willett, ed., *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (London: Methuen, 1978). For Brecht’s theory of realism see also his “On the Formalist Character of the Theory of Realism” (1938) and “Popularity and Realism” (1938) in Theodor Adorno, et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: New Left Books, 1977), pp. 70-79; 79-85. See Lukács, *Essays on Realism*, ed. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981) and *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin Press, 1963).

⁵⁷¹ Willett, *Brecht in Context*, p. 160.

⁵⁷² Jack Levine, *Jack Levine* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), p. 20.

1934 and was hailed as an “outstanding piece of criticism” by the *Daily Worker*.⁵⁷³ Within the field of leftist art criticism, von Wiegand, who had a wide range of contacts within the German émigré community, was perhaps best equipped to address these issues. As Hemingway points out, von Wiegand’s views on German Expressionism (where Brecht’s roots lay) were largely cognate with those developed by Lukács in his 1934 essay “Expressionism: Its Significance and Decline.”⁵⁷⁴ Unlike Lukács however, who, as the title of his essay indicates, was an outspoken critic of the Expressionists and deemed their “subjective idealism” to be steeped in the language “of a rootless and decomposing petty-bourgeois intelligentsia,” von Wiegand was not as dismissive of their formal techniques.⁵⁷⁵ Her “Expressionism and Social Change,” which appeared in the November 1936 issue of *Art Front*, stands as the major contribution to a theorization of American Expressionism from the left. While she did not recommend the aesthetic model of the Brücke group, judging that “neither abstract art nor academic pictorialism are satisfactory means to embody the social struggle of our time as it assumes ever more dramatic and violent form in the US,” she did see value in their spirit of activism.⁵⁷⁶ It was this activism, coupled with the fact that the protracted economic depression was rendering conditions in the US comparable to those in postwar Germany, that gave German Expressionism some degree of relevance within the current American context, enabling her to argue that artists such as Brecht, who had “actively entered the class struggle,” offered a model “suited to American vitality.”⁵⁷⁷

Brecht was in New York from October 1935 until February 1936 and his fortunes were somewhat mixed. Following the critical failure of his *Threepenny Opera*, which

⁵⁷³ Lukács, “Propaganda or Partisanship?” *PR* 1.2 (April-May 1934), p. 43; “Second Issue of *Partisan Review* Appears April 1,” *DW* (31 March 1934). Lukács sets out his theory of realism in “Reportage or Portrayal?” (1932), *Essays on Realism*, pp. 45-75. For Brecht’s response, which, although written in 1938, was only published posthumously, see “Bertolt Brecht: Against Georg Lukács,” *Aesthetics and Politics*, pp. 68-85.

⁵⁷⁴ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 115; Lukács, “Expressionism: Its Significance and Decline,” *Essays on Realism*, pp. 76-133.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 102; 110. Among New York leftists there were a number of artists who engaged the lessons of Expressionism as a means of producing socially-relevant paintings, with the formation of The Ten in 1935 serving as a key motivating force. On the Ten see note 282.

⁵⁷⁶ Von Wiegand, “Expressionism and Social Change,” *AF* 2.10 (November 1936), pp. 10-13.

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

closed after only twelve performances at New York's Empire Theater in 1933, he made the journey to the US to oversee the production of *Mother*, which was staged in 1935 by the New York Theater Union, the most famous "workers' theater" of the day.⁵⁷⁸ While in New York he also found a platform to elaborate his notion of "epic theatre," a concept he developed in his writings during the late 1920s.⁵⁷⁹ His work received a considerable depth of coverage in the pages of both *New Masses* and the *Daily Worker*, and lucid expositions of his ideas were featured in two favourable articles published in the former in December. The first was a laudatory review written by Stanley Burnshaw in which he remarked that "Whatever the arguments for and against the production, 'Mother' stands out as the most beautiful poetic drama of the revolution that has come to this country."⁵⁸⁰ While further acclaiming the production as "a progressive experiment . . . [with] an unimpeachable place in left-wing theater," the review dealt more with the general principles of epic theatre than any specific production.⁵⁸¹ The second article took the form of a two-page essay written by Eva Goldbeck under Brecht's supervision that detailed the dynamics of the "teaching plays" (*Lehrstücke*).⁵⁸² Two years later Max Gorelick elaborated upon Brecht's theoretical formulations in "Epic Realism: Brecht's Notes on the Threepenny Opera," an annotated version of the opera which appeared in *Theater Workshop* in the summer

⁵⁷⁸ One of the skits that comprised Emanuel Eisenberg's musical revue *Pins and Needles*, which was presented by the Labor Stage and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union in 1936, was based on the rehearsals and production of *Mother*. Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*, which was staged by Orson Welles in December 1937 with the Mercury Theatre in New York, was in its own way a *Lehrstück* and was dedicated to Brecht. For a discussion of Brecht's time in America during the 1930s see James Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America* (London: Methuen, 1982), pp. 3-39 and James Murphy, *The Proletarian Moment: The Controversy Over Leftism in Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), pp. 144-147. While in New York during 1935-1936 Brecht became acquainted with Schapiro; see Hemingway, "Meyer Schapiro and Marxism in the 1930s," *OAJ* 17.1 (1994), p. 17. On Blitzstein see Eric Gordon, *Mark the Music: The Life and Work of Marc Blitzstein* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).

⁵⁷⁹ On 31 October 1935 the *Daily Worker* included an interview between Brecht and the Theater Union's Martha Dreiblat; on 24 November *The New York Times* published Brecht's overview of German drama.

⁵⁸⁰ Stanley Burnshaw, "The Theater Union Produces 'Mother,'" *NM* 17 (3 December 1935), p. 27.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸² Eva Goldbeck, "Principles of 'Educational' Theater," *NM* 18 (31 December 1935), pp. 27-28. Goldbeck was the wife of Blitzstein; on Blitzstein and Brecht see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 289-295.

of 1937.⁵⁸³ The next American critic to deal with Brecht (that I am aware of) was Greenberg, whose review of Brecht's 1934 novel *A Penny for the Poor* appeared in *Partisan Review* in the winter of 1939 and was followed that autumn by "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," which Greenberg later claimed to have written specifically in response to Brecht's ideas on mass culture.⁵⁸⁴

As was evident in the discussions of epic theatre that were available to New York leftists during the mid-1930s, Brecht demanded a more critical concept of realism (in Jakobson's sense) than the more conservative (normative, naturalist) one advanced by Lukács, one that did not merely hold fast to artistic conventions developed in the nineteenth-century while the world continued to change. Arguing that modernist strategies represented a technical advance on earlier methods, Brecht suggested that the question of which stylistic techniques should be deployed could not be settled on an a priori basis, but needed to be worked out through experimentation with a variety of means. Furthermore, the most telling way to represent the effects of speed, fragmentation, and disjunction characterizing contemporary reality — effects wrought by increased industrialization and the widespread use of technology — was not to recycle outmoded methods of representation but to emulate the very effects of modern experience. His now famous remark that a photograph of the Krupp's factory tells you nothing about the relations that lie within pointed towards the importance of an alternative approach to realism, one that possessed cognitive potential in that it revealed the relationships underlying social structures, rather than blandly reproducing the social structures themselves. Such a stance thus entailed a wholesale rejection of naturalistic illusionism: "The illusion created by the theatre must be a partial one, in order that it may always be recognized as an illusion. Reality, however complete, has

⁵⁸³ Mordecai [Max] Gorelick, "Epic Realism: Brecht's Notes on the Threepenny Opera," *Theater Workshop* 3 (April-July 1937), pp. 29-40. Three years later Gorelick published his *New Theatres for Old* (New York: S. French, 1940), the first major English-language scholarly work on drama to offer a well-rounded survey of Brecht's works.

⁵⁸⁴ Greenberg, "The Beggar's Opera — After Marx: A Review of *A Penny for the Poor* by Bertolt Brecht," *PR* (Winter 1939); see also Greenberg's "Bertolt Brecht's Poetry," *PR* (March-April 1941), reprinted in O'Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg*, vol. 1, pp. 3-5; and pp. 49-62 respectively. Greenberg makes this claim for "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" in Saul Ostrow, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch Fifty Years Later," *Arts Magazine* (December 1989), pp. 56-57.

to be altered by being turned into art, so that it can be seen to be alterable and be treated as such.”⁵⁸⁵

Like Davis, Brecht also aligned his practice with the tenets of dialectical materialism, later labelling his approach to dramaturgy “dialectical theatre.”⁵⁸⁶ As he opined, in order to expose the dynamism of social reality his method necessarily “regards nothing as existing except in so far as it changes, in other words is in disharmony with itself.”⁵⁸⁷ It was through processes such as distancing and montage, techniques which exploited the potential of so-called “alienation effects” (*Verfremdung*), that seemed capable of such revelation. As he continued, “A representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar.”⁵⁸⁸ One of the upshots of such “making strange,” and one which establishes significant parallels between his practice and modernist strategies developed by both the European and Soviet avant-gardes, was that “the tangible, matter-of-fact” processes involved in cultural production were “no longer hidden behind a veil.”⁵⁸⁹

While definitions of artistic modernism during this period were considerably more expansive than those canonized in the postwar era, Brecht’s emphasis on fragmentation and montage mark his realist practice as a decidedly modernist one. Offering a Marxist theoretical basis for the deployment of certain avant-garde techniques in the development of a contemporary and politically-committed approach to realism, it is this juncture between modernism and realism that enables a dialogue with the mural practice of Davis. Such a dialogue must, however, remain qualified for at least two important reasons: firstly, Brecht’s plays were conceived as “teaching plays” whereas Davis rejected didacticism in his murals (a rejection which should not belie the cognitive potential he accorded to his practice); secondly, their approaches to dialectical realism were shaped by the different possibilities and constraints of theatre

⁵⁸⁵ Brecht as cited in Willet, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 219.

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁵⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

and painting. On this latter point however, while painting is not considered a temporal artform per se — and certainly the potential for temporality within the modernist enterprise was rejected by postwar formalists such as Michael Fried, who was concerned to curtail any overlap with theatre and insisted upon painting's instantaneous effects — Davis's constellations of “deformed” elements cannot be understood all at once and arguably assume a temporal aspect as viewers identify and make sense of them. That being said, the strategies of Brecht and Davis within their respective mediums are analogous in several key respects and are deserving of elaboration.

Instead of a narrative-based artform where objects or events are presented in continuous sequence, Brecht and Davis produced works that lacked causal progression and completion. Engaging the modernist strategy of montage, disparate elements are juxtaposed such that temporal and/or spatial distances are eclipsed, whether on the stage or across the surface of the mural. As Walter Benjamin summarized, montage was “the major constitutive principle of the artistic imagination in the age of technology” and it served as means of ensuring that “the representation is never complete in itself.”⁵⁹⁰ Such disjointed, discontinuous, and heterogeneous imagery, which prevents the viewer from sinking into a state of absorbed contemplation, could be culled from the experience of cinema, which, as Benjamin confirmed, was of particular interest to Brecht, with the new technical forms of cinema corresponding to those deployed in Brecht's epic theater.⁵⁹¹

Similarly, in his “Self-Interview” of 1931, Davis made the connection between the visual effects of cinema, with its capacity for different angles of vision and multiple perspectives, and the development of Cubist techniques, arguing that movies had redefined human perception and thereby implied modern collage: “They allow us to experience hundreds of diverse scenes, sounds, and ideas in juxtaposition that has never before been possible. Regardless of their significance they force a new sense of

⁵⁹⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: New Left Books, 1977), p. xiii.

⁵⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

reality and this, of course, must be reflected in art.”⁵⁹² Acknowledging the relations between film and Davis’s approach to composition, H. H. Arnason observed that “the abrupt shift of point of view . . . suggests the frames of motion picture film with the consequent mingling of simultaneous and consecutive vision.”⁵⁹³ The potential for experiencing multiple sights and sounds juxtaposed one against the other was also offered by radio and television. As many writers have noted, Davis kept several radios in his studio and later a television, which he often watched without sound so that he could listen to the radio simultaneously.⁵⁹⁴

What I am arguing here is that for both Brecht and Davis it was the re-assembling of elements abstracted from reality via montage techniques that seemed to offer an effective approach to creating a relevant realist practice. Moreover, by making these elements strange, both Brecht and Davis threw the burden of thought back upon their viewers. The point, after all, was not to stabilize consciousness and confirm reality as something pre-given and fixed, but to incite change. The modern world was defined by a welter of contradictions and, rather than further mystifying reality, art had to render it in a form that actually exposed these contradictions, that conveyed the alienation of individuals and their dislocation from their environment. Contemporary experience was shaped by the technological innovations central to urban industrial life and, as Davis made clear, any art that claimed to be realist needed to engage this in order to speak to the masses:

An artist who has traveled on a steam train, driven an automobile, or flown in an airplane doesn’t feel the same way about form and space as one who has not. An artist who has used a telegraph, telephone, and radio doesn’t feel the same way about time and space as one who has not. And an artist who lives in a world of the motion picture, electricity, and synthetic chemistry doesn’t feel the same way about light and color as one who has not.⁵⁹⁵

⁵⁹² Davis, “Self-Interview,” *CA* 9 (September 1931), p. 211.

⁵⁹³ H. H. Arnason, *Stuart Davis* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1957), p. 18.

⁵⁹⁴ On the influence of radio and television on Davis’s work see Bonnie Grad, “Stuart Davis and Contemporary Culture,” *Artibus et Historiae* 12.24 (1991), pp. 176-178; and O’Doherty, *American Masters*, pp. 54; 78-79.

⁵⁹⁵ Davis, “Is There a Revolution in the Arts?” *Bulletin of American Town Meetings of the Air* 5.19 (February 1940), p. 12. Interestingly, Léger had made the same observation about the effects of new forms of transportation on perception in 1914; see his “Contemporary Achievements in Painting.”

A shared interest in aesthetic self-reflexivity also aligns the realism of Davis and Brecht with the broader phenomenon of modernism. One of the central tropes of modernist discourse is that since the mid-nineteenth century artists had often drawn attention to the media or materials with which they were working. Similarly, whether on the part of Brecht, who repudiated the illusionist conventions of the stage to intentionally reveal the theatrical constructions of his dramas, or Davis, whose workman-like impasto and emphasis upon the flat surface of the support insists on the materiality of painting itself, both artists demonstrate a desire to foreground the very processes of creation in their respective spheres of endeavour. Further, both Davis and Brecht make this aesthetic self-consciousness — conventionally aligned with a more reactionary formalist stance — work in the interest of a socially-engaged realism. While, as Lunn asserts, it is more common to condemn this as a self-absorbed posture (as many leftists were quick to do during the 1930s) than to recognize the equally significant, but more promising, alternative: “a heightened attention to the ways in which all reality allegedly ‘pictured’ in art is, in fact, constructed by aesthetic activity, form, and materials.”⁵⁹⁶

By revealing the artwork’s own reality as artifice Davis and Brecht thus circumvented what Lunn describes as “the timeworn attempt, given new scientific pretensions in naturalist aesthetics, to make of art a transparent mere ‘reflection’ or ‘representation’” of outer appearances.”⁵⁹⁷ By extension, they were able to firmly emphasize their view that reality was necessarily constructed rather than governed by forces one cannot control, a central tenet in any Marxist approach. As Stanley Mitchell has remarked, “Throughout the left-wing avant-garde of the twenties and thirties, the belief predominated that to attack and repudiate ‘illusionism’ or ‘reproduction’ itself constituted a progressive political act, constituted *the* way in which politics could enter directly into art.”⁵⁹⁸

reprinted in Edward Fry, ed., *Functions of Painting: Fernand Léger*, trans. Alexandra Anderson (New York: Viking Press, 1973), pp. 11-12.

⁵⁹⁶ Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism*, p. 42.

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁵⁹⁸ Stanley Mitchell, “Introduction” in Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, p. xvi.

If, as I am arguing, Davis incorporated some understanding of the alienation effect into his practice (and whether or not this came specifically through knowledge of Brecht is beside the point), the question remains: how does his imagery suggest that a critical artistic consciousness can turn into political consciousness and/or some sort of heightened agency on the part of viewers? In other words, what real difference might such potentially challenging yet also decorative imagery make to the social dynamic of its audience?⁵⁹⁹ Admittedly, such questions do not afford easy answers, but the effect seems to be analogous to that prompted by Brechtian theatre. As Burnshaw explained in *New Masses*, through a dissociation of elements, the viewer “develops a critical attitude toward the social problems unraveled on the stage The ‘epic’ theatre, by showing the world as it changes and how it may be changed, therefore involves the audience in a process of learning. And the emotions may be directed toward understanding and judgments.”⁶⁰⁰ As Burnshaw concludes, the viewer “is capable of making judgments and decisions which will determine his own future conduct.”⁶⁰¹

Similarly, while Davis’s murals are not conventionally didactic, it is also by positing a new mode of reception that his works suggest the potential for an altered socio-political consciousness. He described his painting as an “active agent” that encourages the viewer to “participate in the changing contemporary reality or events which are really near to us.”⁶⁰² Furthermore, although he was loathe to create murals that functioned as a form of propaganda, he was, nonetheless, willing to concede that his art served at least some didactic purpose. With specific reference to muralism, he argued that, as a public artform, murals communicated with viewers and while “this message can be political, educational, commercial, etc., in meaning,” alternatively “it can convey another kind of message, the message of an art of *real order*.”⁶⁰³ Expressly linking the aesthetic realm with the world external to it, he argued that even if “an art of real order in the material of paint doesn’t say ‘Workers of the World Unite,’” it

⁵⁹⁹ I am grateful to Leonard Folgarait for posing this question in such thoughtful and challenging terms.

⁶⁰⁰ Burnshaw, “The Theater Union,” p. 27.

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰² Davis, “Abstract Painting Today,” p. 126.

⁶⁰³ Davis papers, undated 1940 (?).

does offer “a unique configuration of color-space . . . [that] is as real as the organization of workers.”⁶⁰⁴ Suggesting a way in which artistic values may be translated into the register of socio-political values, he argued that the artist’s ordering of these real values could be understood by the viewer to represent a concrete expression of “man’s belief that he can control and direct his environment to his own ends.”⁶⁰⁵

Davis’s claims for the realism of his work had further implications, especially given that one of the inherent problems in any attempt to define what can be considered effective realist art and what devices might most advantageously be employed to produce it ultimately stems from trying to translate what originates as an epistemological realism into some sort of realism in art.⁶⁰⁶ As Lovell affirms, “To investigate realism in art is immediately to enter into philosophical territory — into questions of ontology and epistemology: of what exists in the world and how that world can be known.”⁶⁰⁷ Such questions, however, have a problematic heritage in that, as Hemingway observes, “answers given to them from scholars thinking with the Marxisms of the Second and Third Internationals were essentially teleological in their assumption that a vulgar philosophical realism is the central principle of all progressive thought, and correspondingly, of all progressive aesthetics.”⁶⁰⁸ Davis did not endorse such a naïve realist epistemology and the theory of artistic realism he was developing during the 1930s was closely linked to his philosophy of social reality, which was shifting, mutable, and subject to manipulation. And there lay the crux of his problem with “domestic naturalism,” whether Regionalist or Social Realist. As he explained, “The expression remains static even in the class-struggle variety . . . because although the ideological theme affirms a changing society, the ideographic presentation proves a complete inability to visualize the reality of change.”⁶⁰⁹

⁶⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁶ Lovell, *Pictures of Reality*, p. 64.

⁶⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶⁰⁸ Hemingway, “The Realist Aesthetic,” p. 106.

⁶⁰⁹ Davis, “Abstract Painting Today,” p. 126.

According to Davis, only modernism coincided with “the modern view that the world is real, that it is in constant motion, that it can be manipulated in the interest of man by knowledge of the real character of the objective relations, and that through such control of the environment man can develop his standard of life to higher and higher levels.”⁶¹⁰ For Davis then, modernist form was not merely moulded by social forces in a passive way; rather, modernist form was itself an active social force that constituted an “integral part of the changing contemporary reality.”⁶¹¹ As such, art could be seen to possess the potential to generate political agency within its audience by developing in them a heightened understanding of their own conditions and interests. Davis was thus according to art a significant degree of what Nelson Goodman terms “cognitive efficacy.” Dismissing the absurd myth of the insularity of aesthetic experience, Davis subscribed to the view that how we look at paintings “inform[s] what we encounter later and elsewhere” and is thereby “integral to them as cognitive.”⁶¹²

Léger

Similarly interested in establishing a dialogue between modernism and realism to create an art for the masses, Léger espoused a view consonant with that of Brecht and Davis, one whose influence has not been adequately acknowledged within the history of 1930s American muralism.⁶¹³ Davis (who had met Léger in Paris at the end of the 1920s) heralded him as having produced some of “the greatest paintings of all times” and the French artist’s interest in billboards, advertisements, and product labels made his work well-suited to an American cultural context.⁶¹⁴ Not only did Davis think that Léger was “the most American painter painting today,” but as Lozowick already noted in 1925: “Léger is one of the very few artists whose work pleads with American artists

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹¹ *Ibid.*

⁶¹² Nelson Goodman, *Problems and Projects* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1972), pp.116-117.

⁶¹³ On Léger and America more generally see Carolyn Lanchner, “Fernand Léger: American Connections,” *Fernand Léger* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), pp. 15-70 (especially pp. 36-52 on his sojourns in the US during the 1930s); Simon Willmoth, “Léger and America,” *Fernand Léger: The Later Years* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1987), pp. 43-54; and Phillipe Büttner, *Fernand Léger: Paris-New York* (Basel: Verlag, 2008).

⁶¹⁴ Davis papers, 27 January 1937.

for an American orientation, a closer contact with their industrial civilization so rich in plastic possibilities, and a consequent florescence of an original indigenous art.”⁶¹⁵

Léger's work was introduced to New York artists by the Armory Show in 1913 and Davis's stylized still lifes of household items such as *Odol* (1924) (fig. 47) manifest close affinities with paintings such as Léger's *Le Siphon* (1924) (fig. 48). Léger was well-known for his leftist politics and his identification with the proletariat and several reproductions of his paintings, along with a two-part essay, were included in the *Little Review* during the early 1920s.⁶¹⁶ In 1925, the Société Anonyme organized his first solo exhibition in America at the Anderson Galleries in New York (fig. 49). Among the twenty-four paintings on view was *La Ville* (1919) (fig. 50), a massive work (measuring almost seven and a half by ten feet) whose public scale and dynamic formal repertoire would later influence the murals of Davis and Gorky.⁶¹⁷ The following year his work was featured at the Brooklyn Museum's *International Exhibition of Modern Art* (fig. 51) and additional examples became accessible in New York when Albert E. Gallatin opened his collection to the public in 1927 (fig. 52). Gallatin owned eleven works by Léger, second in number only to Picasso.⁶¹⁸

⁶¹⁵ Davis as cited in Sweeney, *Stuart Davis* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1945), p. 13. Lozowick, "Fernand Léger," *The Nation*, 16 December 1925, p. 712. Léger's work was discussed in a number of articles during the late 1920s and early 1930s, including Jacques Mauny, "Paris Letter," *The Arts* 11 (June 1927), pp. 320; 323; Goodrich, [Léger], *The Arts* 17 (November 1930), pp. 117-119; G. L. K. Morris, "On Fernand Léger and Others," *The Miscellany* 1.6 (March 1931), pp. 1-16; A. Kormendi, "Fernand Léger," *CA* 9 (September 1931), pp. 218-222; and Sweeney, "Léger and the Cinesthetic," *CA* 10 (June 1932), pp. 440-445.

⁶¹⁶ Léger's *Mother and Daughter* was illustrated in the *Little Review* 9.2 (Winter 1922). Seven additional paintings accompanied his essay "The Machine Aesthetic: Manufactured Objects, Artisan and Artist," which was included in the famous "Exiles" issue (Spring 1923), pp. 49-60; the second part of the essay appeared in Autumn-Winter issue (1923-1924), pp. 55-58. On Léger's politics see Sarah Wilson, "Fernand Léger, Art and Politics 1935-1955," *Fernand Léger: The Later Years*, pp. 55-75.

⁶¹⁷ *La Ville* is discussed at length in Christopher Green, *Léger and the Avant-Garde* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. 174-191.

⁶¹⁸ See Bohan, *The Société Anonyme's Brooklyn Exhibition*; and Gross, ed., *The Société Anonyme*. The Gallery of Living Art, renamed the Museum of Living Art in 1933, was installed in a library reading room at New York University. Gallatin's collection, which focused on Cubism and geometric abstraction, provided an informal and accessible venue where artists could study the development of international modernism. On Gallatin see Deborah Bricker Balken, *Albert Eugene Gallatin and His Circle* (Coral Gables, Fla.: Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, 1986). For the gallery contents see *Gallery of Living Art. A. E. Gallatin Collection* (New York: New York University, 1933), with subsequent editions published in 1936, 1940, and 1954.

While New York artists were already familiar with Léger's art and ideas, MoMA mounted a major exhibition of his work in 1935, thereby enabling a more comprehensive first-hand encounter.⁶¹⁹ It was on this occasion that Léger also delivered an important lecture entitled "The New Realism," extracts of which were published in the December 1935 issue of *Art Front*. Léger's example was significant not least because, although he was a committed leftist, like Brecht and Davis, he did not subscribe to the aesthetics of Socialist Realism and instead championed a more critical approach to realism. As Léger noted in relation to the restrictive prescriptions of the Soviet model: "Reality is infinite and richly varied. What is reality? Where does it begin? Or end? How much of it should exist in painting? Impossible to answer."⁶²⁰ Furthermore, he too insisted upon the distinction between realism and naturalism. Arguing that "A picture can never be judged *in comparison* to more or less natural elements" he did not understand realism as tantamount to any faithful copying of nature, despite the fact that "a whole reactionary tendency today proposes to return to this order of things."⁶²¹ Léger maintained instead, as Davis did, that painting functioned as an analogue, a sort of equivalent in its own right, for the wider play of forces in the modern world. Moreover, colour and form, finding their origins in modern life, were not abstract "since they are composed of real values."⁶²²

Léger's first tract in *Art Front* was followed a year later, in February 1937, with a second entitled "The New Realism Goes On."⁶²³ Further explaining his rejection of the Soviet model, with its illustrative approach to social doctrine hung upon an out-moded formal armature, he countered that "realisms must vary by reason of the fact that the artist finds himself always living in a different era, in a new environment, and amid a general trend of thought."⁶²⁴ Léger thus contended that through the use of strident

⁶¹⁹ The exhibition was organized by the Renaissance Society in Chicago and subsequently travelled to the Art Institute of Chicago and the Milwaukee Art Institute.

⁶²⁰ Léger, "The New Realism," *AF* 1.8 (December 1935), pp. 10-11; reprinted in *Functions of Painting*, p. 111 (all quotations will be cited from this latter source). Léger discusses *La Ville* and cinema in this text.

⁶²¹ *Ibid.*; "The Wall, the Architect, the Painter" (1933) in *ibid.*, p. 93.

⁶²² Léger, "The New Realism," p. 110.

⁶²³ Léger "The New Realism Goes On," *AF* 3.1 (February 1937): 7-8; reprinted in *Functions of Painting*, pp. 114-118.

⁶²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

colours and geometric forms, the play of formal contrasts in a work of art could be used to achieve more appropriate representations of the condition of modernity. Yet like Davis, he maintained that such images, while comprised of myriad disparate elements, were not to be understood as abstract in the idealist or non-objective sense and he was equally adamant that his pictures were grounded in material reality.

Asserting that “each art era has its own realism,” while advancing the hopeful claim that the desire for a good modern art could be incited by its being produced, Léger’s conviction that modernist practices could be reconciled with the needs of a mass audience brings his concept of realism particularly close to that being articulated by Davis and Brecht.⁶²⁵ As Léger argued, to suggest that modern art was elitist or unintelligible was merely an “excuse,” for “the people themselves every day create manufactured objects that are pure in tonal quality, finished in form, exact in their proportions.”⁶²⁶ In fact, technically outdated forms of realism were an “insult” to the masses: “It is officially to pronounce them incapable of rising to the level of that new realism that is their age — the age in which they live, in which they work, and which they have fashioned with their own hands. They are told that *le moderne* is not for us, it is for the rich, a specialized art, a bourgeois art, an art that is false from the bottom up.”⁶²⁷ Similarly, Brecht dismissed fears that the use of modernist strategies would render works of art alien or incomprehensible to the masses as a fundamental error. Invoking his own experience as a playwright, he insisted that proletarian audiences welcomed experimentalism and were, in fact, generous rather than censorious towards the artistic vanguard. As he wryly stated, “They were not narrow — they hated narrowness (their homes were narrow and cramped).”⁶²⁸ Art had to change together with society, and the masses might well learn to appreciate not only Van Gogh, but *Guernica* too.⁶²⁹ Tirelessly stressing the indispensability of aesthetic innovation, Brecht insisted: “We must not derive realism as such from particular existing works, but we shall use every means, old and new, tried and untried, derived from art and

⁶²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 114; 115.

⁶²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 117; 116.

⁶²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁶²⁸ Brecht, “Popularity and Realism,” p. 84.

⁶²⁹ Brecht in Willet, *Brecht in Context*, p. 160.

derived from other sources, to render reality to men in a form they can master.”⁶³⁰ Furthermore, Léger also believed that the use of modernist form had cognitive potential. As he later stated “The revolution is not only plastic in nature; it is psychological as well. This freedom, this new space, can help, along with other social means, to transform individuals and to alter their way of life.”⁶³¹

While the new approaches to realism advocated by Brecht, Davis and Léger overlap in a number of fundamental respects, Léger’s insistence that this new realism found its most important outlet in the form of the mural was of particular significance for American leftists. By the mid-1920s Léger was working in collaboration with Le Corbusier and was keen to develop an approach to modernism that would address both the architectural function and social implications of muralism. For example, his painting *Le Balustre* (1925) was showcased in the Esprit Nouveau Pavilion at the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs* in Paris in 1925 (fig. 53), along with *Peinture Murale* (1924), which adorned the entrance hall of the Ideal Embassy (fig. 54).⁶³² For Léger, muralism — an art that was at once “popular, collective and contemporary” — was essential to the process of social development that would bring modern art to a broader public.⁶³³ Significantly, during his sojourn in New York in 1935 he was briefly associated with the FAP, having agreed to paint a mural “almost without any pay.”⁶³⁴ His offer to do so had been tendered to McMahon by his old friend Frederick Kiesler. Kiesler was an architect, theatre designer, and artist who had been a member of the Dutch de Stijl group. In 1926 he emigrated to the US and later ran the “Laboratory for Design-Correlation” at Columbia University from 1937-1943.⁶³⁵ He met Léger in Paris and had arranged for the premiere of Léger’s film

⁶³⁰ Brecht, “Popularity and Realism,” p. 81.

⁶³¹ Léger, “Mural Painting” (1952), reprinted in *Functions of Painting*, p. 179.

⁶³² See Green, *Léger and the Avant-Garde*, pp. 286-309.

⁶³³ Léger, “The New Realism Goes On,” p. 116.

⁶³⁴ Frederick Kiesler to McMahon, 20 November 1935, RG 69, NARA.

⁶³⁵ On Kiesler see Chantal Béret, *Frederick Kiesler: artiste-architecte* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1996). Gorky must have met Kiesler shortly after his arrival in New York because in 1926 Gorky brought him to the Grand Central School of Art to give lectures. Although it is not certain when Gorky met Léger for the first time, the introduction was almost certainly arranged by Kiesler and could have happened as early as October 1931 when Léger was in New York for an exhibition of his drawings.

Ballet mécanique in Vienna in 1924. Writing to McMahon in November 1935, Kiesler suggested that having Léger paint a mural under the auspices of the FAP, perhaps “remodel[ing] the interior surrounding of any hall,” would give New York artists “a real chance of guidance by one of the leaders in modern painting,” while this country would “add to its treasures probably a remarkable piece of work.”⁶³⁶ Moreover, Kiesler reported to McMahon that Davis was taking the matter up with the Artists’ Union and they were “quite enthusiastic” about the prospect of working with Léger.⁶³⁷

Davis wrote on behalf of the Union to Cahill, seconding Léger’s proposition “wherein he expresses his desire to execute a mural on the project.”⁶³⁸ He suggested that “the employment of Léger on the FAP with assistants from the relief rolls, will constitute in very concrete form that cultural opportunity for which the executive of the FAP are so hopeful.”⁶³⁹ As one might expect, Cahill was “very much interested in the project,” and thought that it was a “splendid idea” but there were “many difficulties involved.”⁶⁴⁰ By December McMahon had rejected the idea on technical grounds. Léger was not a citizen and therefore he could not be employed either as a relief or non-relief artist. Moreover, she claimed that it would be too “difficult to find a location that would be worthwhile.”⁶⁴¹ While the possibility of a federal commission was rejected, this did not stop a group of New York modernists from pursuing the project.⁶⁴²

As Diller later recalled, “We decided that if we could find a place where we could do a job that would employ a group of American artists that might take the same theme that he would take . . . [Léger] could collaborate with them, and then they could do whatever variations on that theme that they pleased.”⁶⁴³ A group of seven artists

⁶³⁶ Kiesler to McMahon, 20 November 1935.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶³⁸ Davis to Cahill, 20 November 1935, RG 69, NARA; Davis’s letter was subsequently the subject of a telegram from McMahon to Cahill, 21 November 1935, RG 69, NARA.

⁶³⁹ Davis to Cahill, 20 November 1935, RG 69, NARA.

⁶⁴⁰ Cahill to Davis, 2 December 1935, RG 69, NARA.

⁶⁴¹ Kiesler to Cahill, 16 December 1935, RG 69, NARA.

⁶⁴² *Ibid.*

⁶⁴³ Diller as cited in Garnett McCoy, “Poverty, Politics and Artists, 1930-1945: The Artist Speaks,” *Art in America* 53.4 (August-September 1965), p. 99.

agreed to such a collaboration, five of whom were hired for the Williamsburg commission: Bowden, Browne, de Kooning, Greene, and McNeil. Given that Léger hailed from France, Diller decided that the pier of the French Line Shipping Company at the New York harbour would be a suitable place to approach with their presentation sketches. De Kooning describes the set-up as follows: “[Léger] decided to take the outside of the pier where there was ironwork, and we would do the inside rooms, each of us was to have one panel. He sent us to the Museum of Natural History to get ideas about the sea We were to do our own designs, and he would criticize them and unify them.”⁶⁴⁴ The project was then subject to the approval of both the Commissioner of the Docks, who owned the pier, and the head of the Shipping Company, who leased the pier from the city and who would act as the direct sponsor. However, while the Commissioner heartily approved the sketches (fig. 55), commenting that they would be “a wonderful thing to have at the pier,” the head of the Shipping Company called the mural project off after only a few weeks.⁶⁴⁵ As Diller recounts, when they met the director, he immediately entered into a tirade along the lines of “Well you damn worker, you! You Communist.”⁶⁴⁶ “Léger naturally was terrifically indignant about it,” Diller continued, so “we picked up and walked out. That was the end of that project.”⁶⁴⁷

Although the New York mural project was abandoned, Léger was soon awarded a very prominent series of public mural commissions in France.⁶⁴⁸ Just as a Popular

⁶⁴⁴ De Kooning as cited in Irving Sandler, “Conversations with de Kooning,” *Art Journal* 48.3 (Fall 1989), p. 216.

⁶⁴⁵ Diller, “Interview: Burgoyne Diller Talks with Harlan Phillips,” *AAAJ* 16.2 (1976), p. 19.

⁶⁴⁶ *Ibid.* As Willmoth notes, the director’s antipathy toward Léger was almost certainly the result of the artist’s description of the *Normandie*, one of the Company’s steamships, as a “retrograde conception which belongs somewhere between the taste of the eighteenth century and the taste of 1900,” an assessment he made during his lecture at MoMA. Willmoth, “Léger and America,” p. 46.

⁶⁴⁷ Diller, “Interview,” p. 19.

⁶⁴⁸ Léger did realize several murals in the US: he “decorated” Nelson Rockefeller’s New York apartment in 1938; he painted the exterior wall of the Consolidated Edison Company’s “City of Light” building at the 1939/1940 New York World’s Fair; and he created an enormous mural of divers for the residence of Wallace Harrison on Long Island in 1942. Harrison, who was one of the architects for the Rockefeller Center and had designed the Edison building at the Fair, also attempted to secure a commission for Léger for a “cinematic mural” for Radio City Music Hall in 1938-1939 (seven studies for this mural are in the collection of MoMA). Léger also executed murals for the United Nations building in 1952. On Léger’s murals in the US during the 1930s see Lanchner, “American Connections,” pp. 36-52; Willmoth, “Léger and America,” pp. 44-49; and Ruth Ann Krueger Meyer,

Front government was coming to power in June 1936 after a wave of mass strikes and factory occupations, the centrality of realist art to the politics of the left was further confirmed by a series of debates staged at the Maison de la Culture, an institution supported by the Party. Léger was one of many participants and his “The New Realism Goes On” was published in *Querelle du Réalisme* in Paris that year.⁶⁴⁹ Although his desire to connect realism with modernism encountered strong opposition, a year later, in 1937, he was commissioned to produce five public panels for the *Exposition Internationale de Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne* in Paris, thereby providing him with walls on which to demonstrate his approach. The group of panels he executed were consistent with the machine aesthetic that dominated his previous paintings and, as such, represented the view that technology was a seminal force in the ongoing development of the new order.

Like Davis and Brecht, Léger engaged modernist strategies of fragmentation and montage to represent this new order. For example, the panel entitled *Travail* (fig. 56), which was installed in the Education Pavilion, consisted of an assemblage of photographic enlargements of modern technological equipment. Although presenting a different reality from that found in Socialist Realist works, Léger foregrounded the importance of labour in this new order. The technological devices are centred around, and under the control of, the worker. For the Palace of Discovery Léger also deployed modernist formal strategies to picture the contemporary world and *Le Transport des Forces* (fig. 57) features a montage of elements used in the development of hydroelectric power, such as scaffolding, pylons, and a torrent of cascading water.

It was also within the context of *Exposition Internationale* that the modernist public mural achieved an unparalleled degree of international prominence. While Léger’s murals served to demonstrate that artistic modernism need be neither bourgeois nor apolitical, they were, however, overshadowed by another work that dealt with social concerns in a far more forceful manner — Picasso’s *Guernica* (fig. 58). Painted for the

“Fernand Léger’s Mural Paintings,” PhD thesis, University of Minnesota, 1980.

⁶⁴⁹ See S. Fauchereau, ed., *La Querelle du réalisme* (1936; Paris: Cercle d’Art, 1987).

Spanish Republic's Pavilion to mark the bombing of the Basque capital by the German Condor Legion, Picasso's mural turned Cubist fragmentation and surrealist distortion into a profound expression of rage and a ferocious indictment of bestiality — what Davis described as “one of the greatest formal syntheses in the history of art.”⁶⁵⁰ The American left, including those still hostile to modernism, quickly took note. Although Picasso's modernism had previously been attacked by Marxist critics as a form of escapism, following the unveiling of *Guernica* he was hailed as “the greatest painter of modern times.”⁶⁵¹ Picasso thus served as an influential example of an artist whose commitment to modernism did not compromise his politics and who used painting, in particular the mural, in the service of the Popular Front. Moreover, as Léger insisted, “The working class has a right to all this. It has a right, on its walls, to mural paintings signed by the best modern artists.”⁶⁵² The only issue remaining was that the people would fail to benefit from such murals until “new social conditions” had been established.⁶⁵³ As history would have it, such social conditions were, at least in part, provided for under the aegis of the FAP.

⁶⁵⁰ Davis papers, 29 July 1937; he applauds *Guernica* again in his notes in an undated passage from 1939, and later delivered a paper entitled “Guernica — Picasso” for a symposium at MoMA in November 1947; reprinted in Kelder, *Stuart Davis*, pp. 176-178.

⁶⁵¹ Kainen, “Development of a True Artist,” *DW* 9 July 1937; “Hitler and Picasso,” *NM* 24.8 (17 August 1937), p. 11. Henceforth Picasso became a frequent topic of discussion in the magazine; see, for example, von Wiegand, “Sights and Sounds,” *NM* 23 (22 June 1937), pp. 29-30; “Fine Arts,” *NM* 24 (13 July 1937): page numbers removed; “Cocteau and Picasso,” *NM* 24.9 (24 August 1937), p. 11; Jay Peterson, “Picasso as a Spaniard,” *NM* 25 (21 December 1937), p. 7; Peterson, “Picasso's Mural,” *NM* 31 (16 May 1939), p. 31; and Isabel Cooper, “Picasso,” *NM* 33 (28 November 1939), p. 28.

⁶⁵² Léger, “The New Realism Goes On,” pp. 116-117.

⁶⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

Chapter Five

“Flight From Reality”?⁶⁵⁴ Gorky’s Murals for Newark Airport

Among the first modernist murals created and installed under the aegis of the FAP were those painted by Gorky for the Administration Building at the Newark Airport (fig. 59).⁶⁵⁵ These murals have been discussed in the literature on Gorky far less than they merit and I would suggest that this is for three primary reasons: firstly, histories of American modernism have consistently apportioned little space for analysis of the art of the 1930s; secondly, when the cultural production of this period is mentioned, the use of modernist form is rarely accorded any sustained discussion and is eclipsed by a focus on more figurative tendencies; and thirdly, as early as the 1940s the Newark murals were thought to be lost or destroyed and were thereby literally erased from view.⁶⁵⁶ In this respect, the murals, like Gorky’s output of the 1930s more generally, occupy a unique position within his oeuvre. While the corpus of art-historical writing on Gorky is extensive, it is characterized by an overwhelming focus on the late paintings executed between 1943 and 1948, a period almost universally described as one in which he achieved “maturity” as an artist.⁶⁵⁷ Indeed, it was only after his tenure on the FAP that the assimilation of certain aspects of Surrealism already present in his works of the 1930s came to dominate his aesthetic. Within the larger scope of the history of American modernism it was the work of the 1940s, with

⁶⁵⁴ Davis used this phrase to condemn “mechanically-minded art critics” who saw modernism as a “flight from reality;” Davis papers, 27 August 1937.

⁶⁵⁵ For a detailed study of Gorky’s Newark murals which lays the groundwork for further discussion see Bowman, *Murals Without Walls*; see also O’Connor, “The Economy of Patronage: Arshile Gorky on the Art Projects,” *Arts Magazine* (March 1976), pp. 94-95.

⁶⁵⁶ I am grateful to Michael Taylor and Kim Theriault for organizing the “Rethinking Arshile Gorky” session at the 2008 College Art Association conference which gave me an opportunity to present some of my thoughts on the *Aviation* murals and to benefit from their valuable feedback.

⁶⁵⁷ The numerous monographs on Gorky explore his late works thoroughly, while conceding little space to those of the 1930s. See, for example, Ethel Schwabacher, ed., *Arshile Gorky Memorial Exhibition* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1951); Schwabacher, *Arshile Gorky* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1957); Harold Rosenberg, *Arshile Gorky: The Man, the Time, the Idea* (New York: Sheepmeadow Press, 1962); William Seitz, *Arshile Gorky, Paintings, Drawing, Studies* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1962); and Julien Levy, *Arshile Gorky* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1966). The murals are discussed in Harry Rand, *Arshile Gorky: The Implications of Symbols* (London: Prior, 1981), pp. 32-39 and Jim M. Jordan and Robert Goldwater, *The Paintings of Arshile Gorky: A Critical Catalogue* (New York: New York University Press, 1982), pp. 57-66.

its predominantly expressionist and lyrical style, that pointed towards Abstract Expressionism and thus made it both possible, not to mention desirable, to position Gorky as “a cornerstone of the postwar achievement in modern art.”⁶⁵⁸ My point here is not to refute such claims for they merely serve, yet again, to demonstrate the more widespread biases that have informed the ways in which the history of American modernism has been written. However, in the face of critical assessments of Gorky’s mural practice which, in the words of Harold Rosenberg, conclude that “all through the thirties Gorky was a parodist and ‘quoter’” and, by extension, that his murals were simply stepping stones on a developmental path culminating in his role as a “leading member of the New York School,” I want to return to the Newark panels in order to address the ways in which Gorky responded both formally and politically to an era in which the cultural and ideological priorities informing artistic production were decidedly different from those that subsequently took precedence in the 1940s.⁶⁵⁹

Given Gorky’s tendency to obfuscate aspects of his personal life and subject details of his biography to an intricate process of embroidery — for example, he assumed the name Arshile Gorky and claimed, among other things, to be the Russian cousin of Maxim Gorky and to have completed an apprenticeship under Kandinsky — his political position, like everything about him, is not straightforward. As Barbara Rose points out, only after he died was it generally known that he was not Russian and Julien Lévy, his friend and dealer in the 1940s, referred to him as “a camouflaged man.”⁶⁶⁰ Yet while Gorky remained something of an opaque character within the New York art milieu, actively seeking to cloak himself in an air of “mystery,” I want to argue that he was far more interested in leftist political matters than previous studies suggest.⁶⁶¹ Following his dismissal from the PWAP rolls in the spring of 1934, after

⁶⁵⁸ Jordan and Goldwater, *The Paintings of Arshile Gorky*, p. 7.

⁶⁵⁹ Rosenberg, “Arshile Gorky: The Last Move,” *The Hudson Review* 13.1 (Spring 1960), p. 104; Jordan and Goldwater, *The Paintings of Arshile Gorky*, p. 7.

⁶⁶⁰ Barbara Rose, “Arshile Gorky and John Graham: Eastern Exiles in a Western World,” *Arts Magazine* (March 1976), p. 65.

⁶⁶¹ In her biography of Gorky, Herrera labels him “a Stalinist”; she further attributes the fact that he was not a member of the Party to his precarious position as an immigrant without US citizenship papers and to his awareness that membership might affect his role on the FAP (a conclusion that is unfounded given the sheer number of Party members on the project). I do not agree with Herrera and see little, if any, evidence that Gorky was indeed a Stalinist. Her claims seem to be based entirely on the

only eighteen weeks of pay, he “threw himself into organizing against cuts and demonstrating for greater numbers to be hired.”⁶⁶² Although he is never discussed as a leftist sympathizer, he attended events sponsored by the JRC and participated in initiatives such as the Artists’ Committee for Action and the Union, of which he was a member.⁶⁶³ As fellow artists who formed Gorky’s circle of acquaintance in the 1930s confirm “he was in these things from the beginning.”⁶⁶⁴ Not only did he lecture on the topic of abstract and modern art at the Artists’ Union and make his studio available for their meetings, but he built an effigy to use in a protest march to City Hall in order to “dramatize what the Artists [sic] Union was, to make an abstract tower so large — it was made of painted cardboard, had a wooden skeleton and wires — that six people had to carry it” (figs 60 and 61).⁶⁶⁵

That being said, any attempt to make conclusive statements about Gorky’s perspective during the 1930s or establish consensus around his thinking is stymied by several factors, each of which contributes to the indeterminacy surrounding what can only amount to conjectures about his enigmatic life and work. Little in the way of archival material exists for the artist and the matter has been further complicated by the fact that extracts from his personal letters published by his nephew in three frequently quoted sources have now convincingly been proven to be forgeries.⁶⁶⁶ In terms of Gorky’s relationship to Stalinist politics, it is known that his cousin Ado had risen high in the Party and it can further be surmised that the premature death of his mother in Armenia in 1919 at the hands of the Turks would have made him sympathetic to the

reminiscences of his family members (in this instance his second wife Agnes Magruder) whose perspectives are inevitably affected by their own personal agendas. See Herrera, *Arshile Gorky*, p. 256.

⁶⁶² Matossian, *Black Angel*, p. 221.

⁶⁶³ Gorky’s sketches cover the back of a handout from the Workers’ Cultural Festival jointly sponsored by the JRC and the Trade Union Unity Council in Irving Plaza on 21 December 1934, which is preserved in a private collection in Italy. The pamphlet is illustrated in Spender, *From a High Place*, p. 129.

⁶⁶⁴ Davis, “Arshile Gorky,” p. 182.

⁶⁶⁵ As cited in the remembrances of de Kooning and Robert Jonas in a special of issue of *Ararat* (Fall 1971), pp. 48–49 dedicated to Gorky (and confirmed by Spender, *From a High Place*, p. 125). Bengelsdorf Browne recalls Gorky lecturing at the Union in 1936; see “The American Abstract Artists,” p. 224. The protest march was organized by the Artists’ Committee for Action on 27 October 1934.

⁶⁶⁶ The letters, which Gorky sent to his family during the period from 1937 until his death, first appeared in *Ararat* and were subsequently cited in Karlen Mooradian’s *Arshile Gorky Adoian* (Chicago: Gilgamesh Press, 1978) and *The Many Worlds of Arshile Gorky* (Chicago: Gilgamesh Press, 1980). On the forgery see Matossian, *Black Angel*, pp. 496–498.

counter-attacks of the Red Army.⁶⁶⁷ However, even this supposition is called into question by the experiences of his sister Vartoosh, who repatriated to Soviet Armenia in 1932. While Vartoosh held fast to the Soviet dream after her arrival in the US, with images of “Papa Stalin patting beribboned children imprinted on her mind,” she witnessed first-hand how appallingly Armenians were treated by the Soviet state under Stalin.⁶⁶⁸ Thus while she had urged Gorky to return with her to their homeland and “take his rightful place among the artist of the Revolution,” he soon began receiving censored letters from Armenia in which Vartoosh hinted at poverty, lack of food, political repression and purges and she now “begged him to ‘make the best’ of his life in New York.”⁶⁶⁹ Remarkably, while Vartoosh returned to the US in 1932, her roseate view of the Party had not been diminished and she held meetings of the pro-Soviet HOK (Hayasdan Oknoutian Komite/Committee for Assisting Armenia) Progressive Party in Gorky’s studio, leaving papers and books behind for him to read.⁶⁷⁰ He seems not have shared his sister’s “near-delusional idealism” about Soviet Communism and was particularly disappointed that art under Stalin was so “backward.”⁶⁷¹ Indeed, Gorky’s well-known refusal to paint “poor art for poor people” could perhaps be rethought in this context as both a repudiation of the American trend towards “domestic naturalism” and also as a rejection of the reactionary aesthetic orthodoxy enforced in the Soviet Union.

Gorky’s own rhetoric has been a major factor contributing to his putatively apolitical stance during the 1930s. What has perhaps given him the superficial veneer of being uninterested in political struggles is that he ardently refused to instrumentalize his art in the interest of illustration or propaganda. As Jacob Kainen, an expressionist painter

⁶⁶⁷ On the Turks in Armenia see Donald Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). The independent Republic of Armenia was established in May 1918, but only survived until November 1920 when it was annexed by the Soviets. In March 1922 Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan were brought together as the Transcaucasian Soviet Socialist Republic which became part of the USSR. In 1936, after a reorganization, Armenia became a separate constituent republic of the USSR. Armenia declared its independence from the collapsing Soviet Union on 23 September 1991; see Thomas Streissguth, *The Transcaucasus* (San Diego: Lucent Books, 2001).

⁶⁶⁸ Matossian, *Black Angel*, p. 199.

⁶⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 199; 205

⁶⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

⁶⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

and art critic for the *Daily Worker*, observed in retrospect: “the Depression had driven [artists] to think of social change [and] in such an atmosphere a more than passing concern with aesthetics was tantamount to frivolity.”⁶⁷² Moreover, as fellow modernist Balcomb Greene recalled, while Gorky “attended Union meetings, served on committees, and spoke with much feeling on many issues,” he maintained a deep respect for art.⁶⁷³ However, while Greene, who was also a leftist, flags up the fact that the issue is partly one of autonomy, unlike Gorky and Davis he understood the development of modernist form in terms of an *internal* logic and his model of the artist’s role (to be discussed in the next chapter) was more elitist. This further confuses matters because in describing Gorky’s stance he collapses it into his own, which is evident further on in his recollections when he makes a thinly-veiled jab at Davis:

A good many reputations of secondary grade were made in those days by third-rate painters who were first-rate organizers. It was a time of paper organizations with their letterheads of sponsoring celebrities, issued one every minute — publicity throw-aways and nothing else. Gorky declined such advertising. In the early forties when ‘big business’ in the shape of Artists for Victory, Pepsi-Cola, and Encyclopedia Britannica replaced our ‘class-consciousness’ organizations, Gorky still avoided the letterheads.⁶⁷⁴

While I would in no way make the kind of claims for Gorky’s political commitment as I do for Davis’s — primarily because there is no evidence of Gorky engaging Marxist theory as Davis did — Gorky nonetheless shared Davis’s conviction that muralism need not embrace reactionary formal conventions in order to participate within the broader social and cultural milieu. He certainly did not recognize leftist orthodoxy in the field of aesthetics and, like Davis, he adamantly did not want his painting to serve as a form of illustration or propaganda. In terms of his mural practice he believed that artists needed to embrace the most sophisticated tools at their disposal, namely those developed within the context of European modernism. As Gorky wrote in a tribute to Davis published in *Creative Art* in 1931, while there were “large numbers of critics, artists, and public suspended like vultures . . . [to] hear of the sudden death of

⁶⁷² Kainen, “Memories of Arshile Gorky,” *Arts Magazine* (March 1976), p. 97. On Kainen see *Jacob Kainen* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1993).

⁶⁷³ Greene, “Memories of Arshile Gorky,” *Arts Magazine* (March 1976), p. 109.

⁶⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

Cubism, abstraction, and so-called modern art,” they were “doomed to disappointment.”⁶⁷⁵ Invoking discoveries in science, mathematics, and physics, and championing Davis for taking a “new position upon the visible world,” Gorky argued that modernist form was “the new art of a new age.”⁶⁷⁶ For Gorky, as for Davis, progress in artistic matters did not come from toeing the Party line.

Gorky’s major commission for the FAP — indeed the only one to be realized — was a series of murals on the theme of aviation originally intended for the Administration Building at the new Floyd Bennett Airfield.⁶⁷⁷ Opened in 1931, the now defunct airfield was located at the southeastern end of Brooklyn and was New York City’s first municipal airport. Named after the aviator who flew Admiral Byrd across the North Pole in 1926, the airfield gained much public notoriety for its record-breaking flights. With frequent visits by famous pilots such as Wiley Post, Howard Hughes, and Amelia Earhart, it became one of the most important airfields of its time, making the mural commission a particularly prestigious, not to mention, visible one.

Although the Bennett commission was to have been a single panel measuring 720 square feet, whereas the Newark project comprised ten panels covering some 1,500 square feet, Gorky’s preparatory work for the initial Bennett commission served as the foundation for the panels executed in Newark. In this respect the studies, which demonstrate Gorky’s early efforts to synthesize aspects of realism within a Cubist

⁶⁷⁵ Gorky, “Stuart Davis,” p. 193.

⁶⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷⁷ Alongside mural commissions awarded to Greene and Jean Xceron, Gorky was hired to produce a stained-glass window for the prison chapel at Riker’s Island Penitentiary. Gorky’s window design, which he described as exploiting “the geometrical and ornamental character of abstract modern shapes based on traditional medieval church symbols and dependent upon its final affect [sic] on the richness of the light it casts” was rejected on 12 March 1940 after receiving preliminary approval. Although Gorky resubmitted designs a month later that again received preliminary approval, his window was never realized. Greene’s mural sketch was rejected a month later on 9 April 1940. His mural was intended for the left panel of the Jewish Chapel, and although he recognized that a key part of the commission was to produce a design that “would not in any way offend the religions which use this part of the auditorium,” his studies were found objectionable by the Rabbi due to the inclusion of a small symbol that resembled a swastika. In June 1942 Xceron was given final approval to execute both left and right panels, which are entitled *Abstraction in Relation to Surrounding Architecture*. The panels were completed in 1942 (whereabouts unknown); for a photograph see Haskell, *The American Century*, vol. 1, p. 67. See the records of the Art Commission of the City of New York for a statement written by each artist (quoted above) describing their intentions for the project.

idiom, are particularly significant (fig. 62). The Bennett murals were to incorporate photographs of airplanes and paraphernalia associated with flight taken by Wyatt Davis (Stuart's brother) and Leo Seltzer, with the final work coordinating a montage of photo enlargements with paintings designed by Gorky. This was the first time such a combination of elements had been suggested for a mural design and the inspiration for collaging a variety of abstracted, yet recognizable forms against a flat, undifferentiated ground may well have come from Davis's early mural efforts, which Gorky would have seen first-hand and which Wyatt certainly would have known. Additionally, the relations between mechanical themes and modernist practices had been the subject of the *Machine Art* exhibition mounted at MoMA in the spring of 1934 (fig. 63). Curated by Philip Johnson and opened by Earhart, the show celebrated the kind of machine aesthetic championed by Léger who, in his delineation of the "New Realism," singled out airplane propellers (one of which was featured in the exhibition) as modern forms that "strike everybody as being objects of beauty."⁶⁷⁸

In December 1935 Gorky's design, along with a second by Eugene Chodorow for the same space, was submitted by McMahon to Barr.⁶⁷⁹ Barr selected Gorky's modernist design over Chodorow's strictly figurative one, commenting that Gorky's plans were preferable "from almost any point of view except a purely academic or conventional [one]."⁶⁸⁰ Yet despite Barr's approval, not to mention the support of Cahill (who had taken art lessons from Gorky in 1931 and wrote a text for his solo exhibition in February of 1934 at the Mellon Galleries in Philadelphia), Gorky's murals were not destined for the walls at the Bennett airfield.⁶⁸¹ Although they received approval all along the line, the airfield was Mayor La Guardia's "baby" and he was not impressed with Gorky's plans. Following Barr's letter to McMahon, one of the preparatory gouaches was shown at the opening of the Federal Art Gallery in New York at the end of December. The mayor was in attendance at the opening and was not impressed

⁶⁷⁸ Léger, "The New Realism Goes On," p. 116.

⁶⁷⁹ Spender, *From a High Place*, p. 146.

⁶⁸⁰ Barr to McMahon, 3 December 1935, AAA, Reel 69-64; cited in Spender, *From a High Place*, note 146, p. 387.

⁶⁸¹ In addition to Cahill, Davis and Kiesler contributed to the exhibition pamphlet.

(fig. 64). Although Gorky was enlisted to mollify him and offer something by way of an explanation and a defense of modernism, the project was given to Chodorow, whose work, replete with a muscular image of Icarus, seemed to please La Guardia's more conservative tastes.⁶⁸²

Gorky's design was ultimately transferred to the second floor foyer of the new Administration Building at the Newark Airport, an ultra-modern complex equipped with the most advanced aeronautical technology. Designed to serve as a major passenger facility, the airport was completed in 1934 under the CWA. It was deemed to be an ideal site for murals, and by September 1936 the Commission gave preliminary approval for a ten-panel cycle entitled *Aviation: Evolution of Forms Under Aerodynamic Limitations*. Numerous studies for the murals reveal several successive transformations as the photo-collages were translated into large painted panels (figs 65 to 67). The first of the panels, entitled *Activities in the Field* (fig. 68), was exhibited at MoMA's *New Horizons* that autumn and the remaining nine panels were finished by July 1937.⁶⁸³

Directly following *New Horizons*, Gorky's panel, model and gouaches were sent to an exhibition at the Newark Museum entitled *Old and New Paths in American Design, 1720-1936*, which included a pared down version of the MoMA exhibit. Although the director of the museum, Beatrice Winser (under whom Cahill had worked during his tenure at the museum), undertook the initiative to have artworks created for the new airport and maintained that the Administration Building was "a very wonderful place for murals . . . [where] thousands of people from all over the country will see them," Matthew Spender notes that "the locals were hostile."⁶⁸⁴ The *Newark Ledger*, for

⁶⁸² Somewhat amusingly, Gorky and La Guardia were photographed in front of Gorky's gouache with someone attempting to place a copy of *Art Front* in the Mayor's hands. As recounted by Diller, "Interview," p. 21.

⁶⁸³ From the summer of 1937 until January 1939 Gorky seems "to have been tacitly permitted to work at his easel painting in his studio even though he was technically on the mural division." O'Connor attributes this liberty to the fact that Gorky was "sufficiently respected" and Project Supervisors knew that he "liked to be left alone." Following the World's Fair commission, he was reinstated onto the FAP in June 1939 and remained on the rolls until his termination in July 1941; see O'Connor, "The Economy of Patronage," p. 95.

⁶⁸⁴ Beatrice Winser to McMahon, 22 January 1936, NARA, RG 69; and Spender, *From a High Place*,

example, reproduced Gorky's panel with the headline: "Goodness Gracious! Is Aviation Really Coming to This?"⁶⁸⁵ Sarcastically referring to the panel as "this little gem," the writer sided with the baffled public: "If you look closely, you can distinguish what appears to be an airship tail at the left, but the rest of it has us stumped, too."⁶⁸⁶ A rebuttal on Gorky's behalf was swiftly issued in the December 1936 issue of *Art Front* by Kiesler. Entitled "Murals Without Walls," Kiesler's riposte issued in the form of mocking agreement and drew attention to the distinction between abstraction *as* realism and naturalism: "Well, no abstraction, boys! Better go home and learn how to design wrinkles, and never mind wrinkles in an abstract way, but these must stick to nose and mouth and eyes and even ears."⁶⁸⁷

The panels were not executed *in situ* and were, like the majority of project murals, painted in a studio provided by the FAP. As O'Connor observes, this meant that "the formal relationship . . . between the architectural setting of a New Deal mural and the design of the painting intended for it, broke sharply with traditional — and especially 'academic' — mural practice."⁶⁸⁸ This suited Gorky particularly well as he opposed the view of muralism as mere architectural embellishment and was adamant that "mural painting should not become architecture."⁶⁸⁹ Not only did he rebuff "the interior decorator's taste" in muralism, where "everything must 'match,'" he rejected

p. 163.

⁶⁸⁵ "American Art: WPA Show Opens at the Museum," *Newark Ledger*, 8 November 1936; see also "Mr. Gorky's Murals the Airport They Puzzle," *Newark Ledger*, 10 June 1937.

⁶⁸⁶ "American Art: WPA Show Opens at the Museum."

⁶⁸⁷ Kiesler, "Murals Without Walls: Relating to Gorky's Newark Project," *AF* 2 (December 1936), p. 11.

⁶⁸⁸ O'Connor, "Arshile Gorky's Newark Airport Murals," *Murals Without Walls*, p. 17.

⁶⁸⁹ Gorky, "My Murals for the Newark Airport: An Interpretation" *Murals Without Walls*, p. 13. This text was written for *Art for the Millions*. As Spender contends, Gorky was not equipped to write it alone; but even with help he did not provide the kind of essay which was required in such a context, as is evident in the correspondence between Emanuel Benson (who was organizing the publication) and McMahon; see Spender, *From a High Place*, p. 165; and NARA, RG 69. There are further issues with this text; according to O'Connor, several versions exist and this has led to interpretative problems. For example, the version published in Schwabacher, *Arshile Gorky* and Rosenberg, *Arshile Gorky: The Man, the Time, the Idea* reveals that several alterations were made to the holograph manuscript intended for *Art for the Millions*. O'Connor suggests that such alterations were probably made to render the essay more comprehensible to the general public, but were "unfortunately done at the expense of the artist's ideas and intentions;" see O'Connor, "A Note on the Text's of Gorky's Essay," *Murals Without Walls*, p. 16. All subsequent quotations will be taken from the version of Gorky's essay published in *Murals Without Walls*.

the standard de-valuing of the mural as decorative adjunct and insisted upon its pictorial autonomy.⁶⁹⁰ Invoking the antinomy between the “decorative” and the “pictorial” that has been a mainstay of the modernist narrative (and which has since been re-thought by scholars such as Brilliant, Cottington, Troy, and Wollen), Gorky contended that “Mural painting should not become part of the wall, as the moment this occurs the wall is lost and the painting loses its identity.”⁶⁹¹ In adopting this stance, his views were entirely consonant with those of Gleizes and Metzinger, who argued that in order for painting to differentiate itself from decoration it needed to carry its *raison d’être* within itself; it must be “essentially independent” and “necessarily complete.”⁶⁹²

However, if pictorial autonomy was invoked to ward off the threat of “decoration,” establishing a distinction between muralism and easel painting proved more challenging, especially given that Gorky’s panels were executed on a stretcher in oil on canvas. In contrast to the practices of the Section, where fresco was occasionally used, sixty percent of the murals painted in New York under the FAP were on canvas.⁶⁹³ Moreover, as April Paul remarks, “few Americans were trained in fresco technique” and artists who were awarded mural commissions often did the work in their own studios.⁶⁹⁴ This “muralizing” of easel paintings under the FAP was, according to Kiesler, caused by several key factors, including “the lack of material, the lack of proper wall preparation, the shortness of time, [and] the necessity for a ‘mobile’ mural painting due to short-lived building structures as a whole.”⁶⁹⁵ As a result, the context of the project led to the creation of portable paintings that fused easel and mural techniques, thereby serving as prototypes for the “large moveable

⁶⁹⁰ Gorky, “My Murals,” p. 17.

⁶⁹¹ *Ibid.* On the decorative see note 100..

⁶⁹² Gleizes and Metzinger, “Cubism,” p. 5.

⁶⁹³ O’Connor, “New Deal Murals in New York,” *Artforum* 7.3 (November 1968), p. 45. Although the New York City Mural Division arranged for project artists such as Marion Greenwood to offer demonstrations of fresco and mosaic technique in the Contemporary Arts Building at the World’s Fair, it was not until February 1940 that Cahill was preparing a technical bulletin on the subject of fresco painting; Cahill to *Architectural Forum*, 28 February 1940, RG 69, NARA.

⁶⁹⁴ Paul, “Byron Browne,” p. 18.

⁶⁹⁵ Kiesler, “Murals Without Walls,” p. 10.

pictures” of the postwar New York School that would, as Pollock put it in 1947, “function between the easel and the mural.”⁶⁹⁶

The overall theme for the murals was determined by project officials and the brief called for panels on “early developments in flight” to be followed by “modern aviation;” “the mechanics of flying;” and “activities in the field.”⁶⁹⁷ The formal approach to the iconographic programme was, however, decidedly Gorky’s. Moreover, while he would have been all too aware of prescriptions for federal art that called for an “accessible” aesthetic that engaged some aspect of the American Scene — especially given La Guardia’s earlier denunciation of modernist form as incomprehensible — he did not abandon the formal lessons of modernism and, instead, linked them to the more generally sanctioned concerns of realism. As Diller noted, the Newark commission “certainly had a good deal of formal value, but at the same time it had enough of the objects — particularly, you know, recognizable, discussible by people concerned with aviation and so on.”⁶⁹⁸ Gorky “never was a completely non-objective painter” and it is to his formal repertoire that I now turn.⁶⁹⁹

While Gorky’s desire to abstract elements from nature and then subject them to processes of formal manipulation is usually discussed in relation to certain Surrealist precepts involving the dislocation and dissociation of discrete objects, I want to argue that his aesthetic strategy may also be understood to correspond with the theory of realism practiced by Davis and discussed at length in the previous chapter. Although I do not deny that Gorky’s use of biomorphic shapes establishes clear formal links with the vocabulary of Arp and Miró, I want to suggest that a commitment to realism was considerably more important to his practice in the thirties than was his interest in *sur-realism*, both in terms of his formal concerns and with respect to his belief that muralism was a social art that needed to appeal to a mass audience.

⁶⁹⁶ Pollock as cited in Francis Frascina, ed., *Pollock and After* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), p. 101.

⁶⁹⁷ The iconographic programme was first outlined by Olive Lyford, one of McMahon’s project supervisors, in a report dated 31 January 1936; see O’Connor, “Arshile Gorky’s Newark Airport Murals,” p. 21.

⁶⁹⁸ Diller as cited in O’Connor, “The Economy of Patronage,” p. 95.

⁶⁹⁹ Diller, “Interview,” p. 21.

In a statement written for the PWAP in 1933 Gorky insisted that despite his use of modernist forms his work should not be understood as abstract, but as directly engaging the contemporary world around through the “highest realism.”⁷⁰⁰ While this stance would have helped allay charges of elitism and “un-Americanness” frequently mounted against the use of modernist practices, I want to argue that Gorky’s insistence on the realism of his practice was not merely expedient and had broader socio-political resonance. Moreover, although Jim Jordan has noted Gorky’s repeated use of the term “realism” to describe his murals, he interprets this as a reference to “Cubist literature of the Platonic tradition, [whereby] an analyzed object was thought to be more real than its ‘accidental’ prototype in the visual world.”⁷⁰¹ However, in contradistinction to Jordan’s assertion that Gorky’s was thus an essentializing “intellectual realism,” I want to argue instead that his interest in positioning modernist form as a species of realism was in fact more materialist than idealist in its emphases.

Gorky’s claim to be producing a “realist” art requires explanation given that, like Davis’s work, his paintings do not embrace the conventions of realism in a naturalist sense. For example, his rejection of linear perspective, with its “measurable space” and “clear definite shape[s],” in favour of a Cubist spatial framework and the aesthetics of collage, was a means of capturing the “new reality” of the contemporary urban environment, with its “intensity,” “activity,” and “nervous energy.”⁷⁰² Endorsing a “constructive attitude” toward painting, he reproached the “weakness of the Old Masters,” who believed that “their painting was complete when the outline of the object was correct.”⁷⁰³ As he insisted, “the realism of modern painting is diametrically opposed to this concept, since the painter of today operates on the given space of the canvas, breaking up the surface until he arrives at the realization of the entirety.”⁷⁰⁴ Moreover, while each element in the Newark murals has been abstracted from photographs and is thus culled from the real world, Gorky was not at all interested in merely mirroring nature and claimed to “oppose the photographic

⁷⁰⁰ Gorky, Project Card, 20 December 1933.

⁷⁰¹ Jordan, “The Place of the Newark Murals in Gorky’s Art,” *Murals Without Walls*, p. 56.

⁷⁰² Gorky, “Stuart Davis,” p. 193.

⁷⁰³ *Ibid.*; Gorky, “My Murals,” p. 13.

⁷⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

image.”⁷⁰⁵ In an effort to thus present aspects of reality in a visual language that reduced the structure of each element into a series of planar relationships “a plastic operation [was] imperative.”⁷⁰⁶ As Gorky explained: “I dissected an airplane into its constituent parts. An airplane is composed of a variety of shapes and forms and I have used such elemental forms as a rudder, a wing, a wheel and a searchlight to . . . invent within a given wall space plastic symbols of aviation.”⁷⁰⁷ Presented in a flattened, schematic fashion that de-contextualizes and de-naturalizes them, elements become isolated “plastic symbols” that function as pictorial equivalents for real objects such that the realm of painting is rendered analogous to the world exterior to it.⁷⁰⁸

While Gorky’s formal vocabulary betrays the influence of Synthetic Cubism and Purist still-life painting, his use of bold, saturated colours contrasted with black and white, combined with the mechanical precision of his iconography, indicates significant debts to Léger.⁷⁰⁹ As has been discussed in the existing literature on the Newark murals, *Activities on the Field*, the most Légeresque of the panels, is strikingly akin to Léger’s *La Ville* (1919), with its collage of predominantly flat shapes set within a shallow space and punctuated by modeled forms.⁷¹⁰ Both paintings are compositionally complex and are characterized by juxtapositions of crisp verticals and diagonals, abrupt collisions of overlapping hard-edged planes, and sharp cuts from element to element. As Christopher Green observes with respect to Léger’s treatment of subject matter in *La Ville*, during this period he was interested in “no more than a generalized ‘equivalence’, not a specific ‘likeness,’” which was exactly what Gorky was trying to achieve in his Newark murals.⁷¹¹

⁷⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁷⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁷⁰⁹ As Waldman notes, Amédée Ozenfant was living in New York at this time and Gorky was known to have visited his studio; *Arshile Gorky*, p. 38.

⁷¹⁰ See, for example, Jordan and Goldwater, *Arshile Gorky*, pp. 60-62. The frequency with which this similarity is noted is partly due to the fact that one of the few remaining sketches for the Newark murals is a gouache of the left-hand panel of *Activities in the Field* on loan to MoMA, thereby making it the most widely known portion of the murals.

⁷¹¹ Green, *Léger and the Avant-Garde*, p. 183.

Jordan offers a concise comparison of the two paintings, noting that, among other similarities, Gorky's expansive curves and decorative stripes match analogous forms in the work of Léger, while Gorky's stylized mechanic resembles the robotic figures descending the staircase in the centre of *La Ville*, which even includes a flat yellow propeller-blade in its lower right corner.⁷¹² Also noting the parallels between the two works, Rosenberg commented that "Taking Gorky at his word, we should have to conclude that airplanes rise into the ether so as to arrive at Léger."⁷¹³ Although, as Jordan points out, *La Ville* only entered the collection of Gallatin's Gallery of Living Art in early 1937, some five months after the final designs for the Newark murals were complete, thus making it unlikely that the painting itself was a direct, first-hand influence, it is entirely possible that Gorky saw it when he first arrived in New York in 1926 on the occasion of the Léger exhibition mounted in Brooklyn.

Regardless, *La Ville* was one of Léger's best-known paintings and it had been widely reproduced. Gorky was an avid reader of art publications and a full-page colour illustration of *La Ville* was found in his studio, replete with paint-stained fingerprints all around the margins.⁷¹⁴ We can thus surmise that Gorky was indeed looking at *La Ville* and it was also a well-known fact that, as Rosenberg asserts, he "memorized the shapes in reproductions as one might lines of poetry."⁷¹⁵ Moreover, given that Gorky was, as Schapiro notes, a "fervent scrutinizer" of paintings, he may well have studied the enormous painting which, while technically not a mural, would have suggested formal and compositional strategies for dealing with the scale of the Newark panels, the largest paintings he had worked on to date and the tallest of which measures approximately nine feet.⁷¹⁶

⁷¹² Jordan and Goldwater, *Arshile Gorky*, p. 61.

⁷¹³ Rosenberg, *Arshile Gorky*, p. 91.

⁷¹⁴ Jordan, "The Place of the Newark Murals," note 23, p. 63. For example, Léger's *La Ville* was illustrated in Maurice Reynal's *Fernand Léger* (1920); E. Teriade's *Fernand Léger* (1928); and in an article on Léger in *Cahiers d'Art* (1933), all of which would have been available to Gorky in New York.

⁷¹⁵ Rosenberg, "Arshile Gorky: The Last Move," p. 102.

⁷¹⁶ Schapiro, "Arshile Gorky," p. 179.

Although Gorky took inspiration from *La Ville* his relationship to his sources was more complex. As the original gouache and photomontage studies executed for the Bennett mural in 1935 suggest, many of the compositional elements for *Activities in the Field* were based on the photographs taken by Wyatt Davis and the iconography is largely abstracted directly from the earlier collage. Significantly, it could also be convincingly argued that Gorky's approach to the Newark panels was influenced by Davis's *Egg Beater* series (1927-1928) — paintings that Davis showed to Léger while in Paris and which the French artist apparently liked "very much."⁷¹⁷ As Diane Waldman has noted, "the urban technological theme of the murals moved Gorky to search for appropriate new models," and she cites Davis amongst them. Indeed, I think Davis's approach to modernist practices in the *Egg Beaters* was particularly significant and his paintings of the late 1920s, along with his early murals, would have offered formal solutions to the problem of transposing conventional elements into a modernist visual idiom.⁷¹⁸

To begin with, both artists started out with industrially-produced three-dimensional objects (in Davis's case an electric fan, a rubber glove, and an egg beater nailed to a table) and sought to deconstruct them into constellations of two-dimensional interlocking planes. For example, Gorky's *Mechanics of Flying* (fig. 69), like Davis' *Egg Beater No. 4* (fig. 70) consists of flattened, fractured elements arrayed across the surface of the support in unmodulated, saturated colours, and both have the look of collaged cut-outs set against an exceptionally shallow ground. Moreover, Gorky adheres to Davis's recommendation that visual details needed to be eliminated in order to "strip [the] subject down to the real physical source of its stimulus."⁷¹⁹ Yet despite their largely abstract character both paintings continue to maintain connections to the conventional still life in their compositional structure and Gorky, like Davis, argued for the realism of his approach. Following Davis, who claimed that while "The method of construction was based on abstract theory, the picture itself was a concrete visual

⁷¹⁷ Davis recounted Léger's response to the paintings in a letter to his father on 17 September 1928 which is quoted in Wilkin, *Stuart Davis*, p. 120. On the *Egg Beaters* see, for example, Sims, *American Painter*, pp. 184-190 and Davis, "Eggbeater Series" (1941), reprinted in Kelder, *Stuart Davis*, p. 99.

⁷¹⁸ See, for example, Waldman, *Arshile Gorky*, p. 38 and Spender, *From a High Place*, p. 88.

⁷¹⁹ Sweeney, *Stuart Davis*, p. 16.

image, capable of creating direct sensations of form and color in exactly the same way as any accidental association of objects in nature creates visual sensations,” Gorky similarly insisted that “These symbols, these forms I have used in paralyzing disproportions . . . impress upon the spectator the miraculous new vision of our time.”⁷²⁰

In his Newark murals then, Gorky seems to be working according to the same formal procedure he outlined in his initial statement regarding his unrealized PWAP mural. As he stated in 1933: “My intention is to create objectivity of the articles which I have detached from their habitual surroundings to be able to give them the highest realism.”⁷²¹ Gorky’s murals merely suggested the look of non-objectivity when, as Kiesler confirmed, in fact the design was “very realistic” and basically adhered to a prescribed, representational subject matter.⁷²² According to Gorky, this process of transposing and translating representational subject matter into a modernist vocabulary created a “new reality.”⁷²³

What I am arguing here is that Gorky subscribed to the same kind of realist position adopted by Davis and Léger. He too sought to achieve a synthesis between observation and abstraction in ways that suggest art was not a tool for either mirroring or illustrating nature, but that the distinctions between the artistic realm and the world around were registered through analogy. Moreover, he shared their conviction that such realist mural painting had social implications and was ideally suited for a mass audience. Emphasizing muralism’s potential to serve as a truly social artform, Gorky argued that mural painting could only serve in an educational capacity — rather than a merely “decorative” one — if it ceased to offer the public images painted “in a descriptive sense, portraying, cinema-like, the suffering or progress of humanity.”⁷²⁴ Furthermore, he argued that the masses had a right to enjoy the plastic forms of modernism: “Since many workers, schoolchildren, or patients in hospitals (as the case

⁷²⁰ *Ibid.*; Gorky, “My Murals,” p. 15.

⁷²¹ Gorky, Project Card, 22 December 1933.

⁷²² Kiesler, “Murals Without Walls,” p. 11.

⁷²³ Gorky, “My Murals,” p. 13.

⁷²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

may be) have little or no opportunity to visit museums, mural painting could and would open up new vistas to their neglected knowledge of a far-too-little-popularized art.”⁷²⁵

It seems, however, that the “locals” did not share Gorky’s optimistic embrace of a new form of radical realism. As the *Aviation* murals neared completion they were greeted with a barrage of criticism. Although von Wiegand (who generally disdained the FAP and felt that it only served to entrench artists in outmoded practices) asserted that Gorky was “the only man who has done a fairly decent WPA mural,” few were of the same opinion.⁷²⁶ According to the *Newark Ledger*, Gorky’s “supposed conceptions” of airplanes merely “puzzled” the public, and visitors to the new Administration Building “were walking around in a daze... trying to decipher [the] series of startling murals.”⁷²⁷ In fact, once the murals were completed, final approval from the Newark Municipal Commission (established in November 1936) was nearly denied. As Davis recalled, “a local committee who had to approve them was hemming and hawing, and trying to find some valid excuse to reject them.”⁷²⁸ Davis and the New York FAP organized a delegation in defense of Gorky to “invade this benighted suburb and put the locals in their place.”⁷²⁹ As the artist member of the delegation Davis reported “there was nothing to it after the first broadside fired by our oratorical Professors, Doctors and Experts. One of the locals quickly joined our side, and the rout was complete.”⁷³⁰ The delegation ensured that an official surrender on the part of the local committee was signed, and the cavalcade “sped back victorious to the taverns of New York to celebrate.”⁷³¹ Such a victory for Gorky’s murals was, however, short-lived. Of the ten panels installed at the Newark Airport, only two survive, *Aerial Map* (fig. 71) and *The Mechanics of Flying*. Remodelling of the building by the Army Air Corps during World War II and subsequent alterations by the Federal Aeronautics Agency probably account for the loss of the eight missing murals. The two surviving panels,

⁷²⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷²⁶ Von Wiegand to Freeman as cited in Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, note 41, p. 303.

⁷²⁷ “Mr. Gorky’s Murals the Airport They Puzzle!” *Newark Ledger*, 10 June 1937.

⁷²⁸ Davis, “Arshile Gorky,” p. 183.

⁷²⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷³⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷³¹ *Ibid.*

from the east walls, were rediscovered in 1973 under fourteen layers of paint. Following their restoration the Port Authority appointed the Newark Museum the permanent custodian of the works and they were unveiled to the public again in 1978, now remaining on permanent view, and recently re-restored.⁷³²

A further objection to Gorky's murals was raised about a pentagonal red star adorning the right-hand panel of *Activities on the Field*. While the red star was a well-known emblem for the Soviet Union and a symbol for Communism, Gorky claimed it was simply the symbol for the Texaco oil company (fig. 72).⁷³³ One may have pause to wonder though. Spender has recently pointed out that in the *Aerial Map* panel Gorky surreptitiously included the symbol of the Artists' Union, a hand clenching a sheaf of brushes, which had been pictured over a map of the US on the cover of *Art Front* in February 1936 (fig. 73).⁷³⁴ Additionally, the composition of *Aerial Map* is strikingly similar to a notice appearing in *New Masses* in November 1938 announcing *We Like America*, its first annual art exhibition (fig. 74). Superimposing a palette and the artist's tools over a map of the US, and replete with single star, the choice of iconography, while possibly coincidental, at very least suggests that Gorky was using a visual vocabulary embraced by the left. Within a public and highly visible federal commission he had thus managed to execute a cycle of murals that engaged modernist forms in a sophisticated re-conceiving of realism, while also, albeit subtly, expressing his solidarity with fellow artists on left. These were surely the actions and ideas of an artist whose approach to muralism was anything but apolitical.

⁷³² See Bowman, "Arshile Gorky's Aviation Murals Rediscovered," *Murals Without Walls*, pp. 34-45. The murals are currently undergoing conservation to remove all of the 1970s overpaint and will be unveiled once again in September 2009. I am grateful to Mary Kate O'Hare for continuing correspondence regarding these panels.

⁷³³ For more on this incident see McKinzie, *The New Deal*, pp. 165-166. Diller also recalls objections to Gorky's murals, see "Interview," p. 18.

⁷³⁴ Spender, *From a High Place*, p. 152.

Chapter Six

Swinging Left: The Williamsburg Housing Project Murals

Following on the heels of Gorky's murals for the Newark Airport were those for the Williamsburg Housing Project (figs 75 and 76).⁷³⁵ While both venues provided a public context in which to showcase modernist muralism, the Williamsburg commissions were especially welcomed by leftists as they were to be installed in one of the first examples of modernist social housing in the US. From an art-historical perspective the murals are significant in at least two important, and largely unprecedented, respects: on the one hand, they manifest a dynamic departure from the narrative themes that prevailed in so much muralism of the decade and offer an intersecting set of approaches to modernist form; on the other hand, the Williamsburg Project serves as a site where modernism was, in fact, brought to the masses. For Davis, one of the key aspects of this commission was that the murals were intended for communal spaces where working-class residents actually lived and they would have the necessary time to enjoy them. As Davis argued:

The trouble is not with leisure but that so few people have it. The meager patronage of the leisure class is not an evil thing. It has made possible the development of modern art. The trouble with it is primarily one of extent and social irresponsibility. It establishes a monopoly in culture. We want more patronage and more leisure for more people to enjoy art.⁷³⁶

Davis's stance echoes Léger's contention that what was required for the development of a true people's culture was more leisure time. As Léger stated specifically in relation to murals: "Free the masses give [the working class] time and leisure, and it will make itself at home with such paintings, will learn to live with and to love them."⁷³⁷ Williamsburg provided just such a site and, as Davis insisted: "A people's art can only come through the establishment of Federal support of art, better wages and hours legislation, and better housing conditions. In other words the establishment

⁷³⁵ On the Williamsburg murals see Troy, "The Williamsburg Housing Project Murals."

⁷³⁶ Davis papers, 9 March 1938.

⁷³⁷ Léger, "The New Realism Goes On," p. 117.

of the political, social and economic conditions whereby the people have the time, the place, and the money to participate in artistic culture.”⁷³⁸

The use of modernist forms within this context fit particularly well with Davis’s contention that such forms were both realist and accessible. Attempting to defend his approach to muralism against charges of elitism or social irrelevance he again drew upon the example of Léger. Modernism, he argued, was not only more suitable for public housing than other forms of “social art” in that “the people have a right to the best in art and not mere reminders of their miserable condition,” but it was also an art that they were already familiar with in that modernist form affected the design of contemporary objects, including “the shape and color of clothes, autos, cameras, airplanes, trains, cooking utensils, etc.”⁷³⁹ As Davis concluded in his working notes on the project, “Art is a historical product. The same age that has produced better houses has produced a better art, suited to [the] modern environment.”⁷⁴⁰ Capturing “the colours and shapes of the time,” it was modernist form that was best suited to this new environment.⁷⁴¹ After all, “What kind of representational art,” Léger had demanded of his *Art Front* readers, “would you impose upon the masses, to compete with the daily allurements of the movies, the radio, large-scale photography and advertising?”⁷⁴²

Like modern architecture, modern art embraced the “new sense of space and color which reflect the broader view and experience of modern man which modern technological advance has made possible.”⁷⁴³ Moreover, as Davis contended, if working-class residents were not familiar with abstract painting itself (whether “realist” or non-objective), this was because it was “too expensive.”⁷⁴⁴ But now, thanks to the FAP, “the government has made a start in bringing this abstract art directly to the people in modern homes.”⁷⁴⁵ New Deal administrators were keen to

⁷³⁸ Davis papers, 9 March 1938.

⁷³⁹ *Ibid.*; October 1937.

⁷⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴² Léger, “The New Realism Goes On,” p. 117.

⁷⁴³ Davis papers, October 1937.

⁷⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

agree. Even Olin Dows, the director of TRAP, who did not encourage the use of modernist practices on his project (as was demonstrated in 1936 when he requested that he be sent no more abstractions) noted that not only were the art projects “living proof of a practical and pragmatic social consciousness,” but that the results “were particularly well exemplified by [the] sculpture and painting done for a few housing projects.”⁷⁴⁶

The Williamsburg Housing Project was built entirely with government funding and both the promise of decent homes and the provision of murals may be viewed as part of the New Deal’s attempt to provide a more “abundant life” for the nation’s citizens. In January 1937, on the occasion of his second inaugural address, Roosevelt delivered a landmark speech in which he promised to address the plight of the “forgotten man” — that one-third of a nation who was ill-housed, ill-clad, and ill-nourished. A year later, following the passing of the Wagner-Steagall Housing Act, he further vowed that the New Deal administration was “launching an attack on the slums of this country which must go forward until every American family has a decent home.”⁷⁴⁷

Lack of social housing was a serious problem during the Depression. As McCausland observed in her review of *Roofs for Forty Million*, an exhibition organized by An American Group, Inc.:

One-third of a nation housed in sub-standard dwellings; only 2 percent of the housing of New York City fit for human habitation by the criteria of modern sanitation and city planning; a quarter of the country’s homes without tubs or showers . . . ; 17 percent without private indoor toilets; 30 percent without gas for cooking; half without furnaces or hot water boilers.⁷⁴⁸

⁷⁴⁶ Dows, “Art for Housing Tenants,” *MA* 31.11 (November 1938), p. 662.

⁷⁴⁷ Roosevelt as cited in Badger, *The New Deal*, p. 238. Communists and fellow-travellers viewed New Deal housing policy as a series of unsatisfactory half-measures. Sidney Hill was the major critic on housing issues for *New Masses*; see “Roosevelt Houses the Worker,” *NM* 12 (21 August 1934), pp. 9-10; “The Slum Clearance Farce,” *NM* 12 (4 September 1934), p. 113; “Housing in the Sky: The Collapse of the Roosevelt Program,” *NM* 15 (21 May 1935), pp. 9-11; “Slum-Clearing the Workers,” *NM* 23 (20 April 1937), pp. 20-23; “What Do You Mean, Housing?” *NM* 23 (4 May 1937), page numbers removed; and “Homes for the One-Third,” *NM* 27 (26 April 1938), pp. 19-20.

⁷⁴⁸ McCausland, “Housing Exhibit and Harriton’s Art,” *NM* 27 (19 April 1938), p. 26. A month previously McCausland praised the Soviet housing system; see “Architecture in the USSR,” *NM* 26 (15 March 1937), pp. 28-31.

As she concluded, “this is housing in the land whose billboards boast, ‘The American standard of living is the highest in the World.’”⁷⁴⁹ Although by 1937 the government had already established the PWA’s Housing Division with the aim of slum clearance and the construction of low-cost dwellings, under Harold Ickes’s cautious direction they had built a meager 21,079 units in fifty projects since its inauguration in 1933.⁷⁵⁰ The Williamsburg Housing Project, which was a collaborative undertaking between the Housing Division and the New York City Housing Authority (established in 1934), was one such initiative.

Located in North Brooklyn along the East River, Williamsburg was described by the *Federal Writers Guide to New York* as “an old, neglected, working-class residential area” that was comprised of “virtually unrelieved slums.”⁷⁵¹ As one of the most congested residential areas in Brooklyn, it was the ideal site for New York’s first experiment in large-scale low-rent housing. The area was cleared following the recommendations of the PWA in 1934 and the contract for the project was signed in June 1935. Speaking at the groundbreaking ceremonies in January 1936, Ickes referred to Williamsburg as “a great beacon . . . [that was] both a symbol and an outpost of a new idea.”⁷⁵² The project was the largest and costliest undertaken by the PWA and was understood to function as a demonstration of what could be achieved with government funds. As Williamsburg’s chief architect Richard Shreve (a partner of the firm responsible for the Empire State Building) wrote to New York City’s Housing Authority commissioner Langdon Post: “this project is the beginning of what, in a way, is a housing community experiment and as the public attitude toward housing will be largely controlled by the success or failure of such an experiment, it is of

⁷⁴⁹ McCausland, “Housing Exhibit,” p. 26.

⁷⁵⁰ Badger, *The New Deal*, pp. 240-241; on the PWA’s Housing Division and New Deal housing policy see pp. 235-244; and Gail Radford, *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁷⁵¹ Federal Writers’ Project, *The WPA Guide to New York City* (1939; New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), p. 455.

⁷⁵² Harold Ickes, [Public Address], 3 January 1936, New York City Housing Authority Collection (NYCHAC), La Guardia and Wagner Archives, Fiorello H. La Guardia Community College, City University of New York, Long Island City, New York; a copy of the original contract may be found in NARA, RG 48.

importance that every effort be made to make the first experiment successful.”⁷⁵³ The project was completed in 1939 and offered affordable two to five room apartments to a working-class community. The apartments featured modern appliances, social and health programmes, and a tenant-controlled council. Income and need formed the basis for the selection of tenants, with preference given to former residents of the site; more than 25,000 New Yorkers applied for the 1,622 apartments.

Shreve appointed William Lescaze, widely regarded as “a leader in modernism,” to head up a team of ten architects working on the Williamsburg project and Lescaze was responsible for the general design and planning of the huge layout.⁷⁵⁴ Lescaze was born in Switzerland and had studied with the architect Karl Moser, followed by a brief period under Henri Sauvage, a leading designer of apartment blocks in Paris.⁷⁵⁵ He moved to the US in 1920 and, after forming a partnership with George Howe in 1929, collaborated on the influential skyscraper for the Philadelphia Savings Fund Society in 1932. During the 1930s he frequently returned to Europe and was deeply interested in the new social housing schemes being realized in Germany and Holland.

Many of these new European housing designs had recently been included in the seminal *International Style* exhibition mounted at MoMA in 1932 (fig. 77). Organized by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, the show was the first architectural show staged at the museum and, according to Schapiro, it was “surely the most important in its history.”⁷⁵⁶ In combination with the accompanying publication *The*

⁷⁵³ Richard Shreve to Langdon Post, 31 July 1935, NYCHAC.

⁷⁵⁴ Sheldon and Martha Cheney, *Art and the Machine: An Account of Industrial Design in 20th – Century America* (New York: Acanthus Press, 1936), p. 168. The other members of the team were James Bly, Mathew Del Gaudio, Arthur Holden, Samuel Gardstein, Paul Trapani, G. Harmon Gurney, Harry Walker, and John Ingle, Jr.

⁷⁵⁵ On Lescaze see Robert Coates, “Profiles, Modern, William Lescaze,” *New Yorker*, 12 December 1936, p. 50; Christian Hubert and Lindsay Stamm Shapiro, *William Lescaze* (New York: Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies and Rizzoli, 1982); and Lorraine Welling Lanmon, *William Lescaze, Architect* (London: Associated University Press, 1987).

⁷⁵⁶ Schapiro [written under the pseudonym John Kwait], “The New Architecture,” *NM* 7.11 (May 1932), p. 23; see also his “Architecture Under Capitalism,” *NM* 8 (December 1932), pp. 10-13 and “Architecture and the Architect,” *NM* 19 (7 April 1936), pp. 30-31. For a discussion of Schapiro’s writings on architecture that contextualizes them within his approach to Marxism in the 1930s see Hemingway, “Meyer Schapiro and Marxism,” pp. 14-15; see also Hemingway’s “Meyer Schapiro:

International Style: Architecture Since 1922, the show introduced American audiences to social housing initiatives designed by a range of the most advanced international architects, including J. J. P. Oud, Ernst May, Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, and Walter Gropius.⁷⁵⁷ Claiming that modernist architecture was the “favored art of Soviet planners,” Schapiro argued that it provided “the indispensable technique and esthetic of a Socialist community” and, furthermore, that such designs “imply a social revolution.”⁷⁵⁸ As Hemingway observes, Schapiro’s assessment suggests that he was not yet able to foresee the significance of the Palace of the Soviets competition (1931-1932), nor the more widespread rejection of modernism that was soon to define Stalinist orthodoxy.⁷⁵⁹ Moreover, while Schapiro emphasized the socio-political relevance of modern architecture, the exhibition itself tendentially presented these developments in formal terms, bringing them together under the damaging rubric of a “style” and thereby evacuating their radical associations.

Despite the museum’s desire to strip modern architecture of its political significance, Lescaze was adamant that the American approach to building required a complete overhaul and he further insisted that modernism was the only appropriate architecture in a democratic society.⁷⁶⁰ Intent on maintaining the modernist commitment to improving living conditions through the provision of air, space, and light, his design for the Williamsburg project consisted of twenty four-storey walk-up buildings turned at fifteen degree angles to the street grid so as to create open airy courtyards and “obtain maximum of sun in the maximum of rooms.”⁷⁶¹ Following an inspection of the full-scale model in December 1935, *The New York Times* reported that the project “throws into graphic relief the application of the new principle of multiple housing, providing more air, sunlight and recreational facilities and involving a departure from the solid-block construction.”⁷⁶² However, a discussion of the Williamsburg

Marxism, Science and Art” in Hemingway, ed., *Marxism and the History of Art: From William Morris to the New Left* (London: Pluto, 2006), pp. 123-142.

⁷⁵⁷ The catalogue was republished as *The International Style* (New York: Norton, 1966).

⁷⁵⁸ Schapiro [Kwait], “The New Architecture,” p. 23.

⁷⁵⁹ Hemingway, “Meyer Schapiro and Marxism,” p. 15.

⁷⁶⁰ Lescaze, “America is Outgrowing Imitation Greek Architecture,” *MA* 30.6 (June 1937), pp. 368-369.

⁷⁶¹ Lescaze to Post, 2 November 1936, NYCHAC.

⁷⁶² “Housing Project Shown in a Model,” *NYT*, 19 December 1935.

development in May 1938 reveals that the plan and its realization were not without their critics. Writing in *Pencil Points*, Talbot Faulkner Hamlin fully supported the validity of the project in social terms and admired certain qualities in the buildings that were “fresh and inventive and alive.”⁷⁶³ He did, however, take issue with the “mechanical regularity” and “aggressive formality” of the modernist design, which gave the project an “an institutional character.”⁷⁶⁴ Although a year earlier he had commented that “the design was economical and clever,” in 1938 he found that the emphasis on the grid produced “a feeling of weary repetition” and, worse yet, the exterior of each building was “obstreperously striped.”⁷⁶⁵ Hamlin further lamented that a project such as Williamsburg, which was meant to demonstrate the value of a “people’s architecture,” was based on a design that would only “bring pleasure to the esoteric few.”⁷⁶⁶

Significantly, among those few was Gropius, who was interviewed on the subject of New York architecture during a visit in April 1937. Following an inspection of the Williamsburg site, he praised the design, commenting that Lescaze “seems to have solved the problem of space and light very economically, and it has the great advantage of being spread over enough land to make it worthwhile as a sample of a planned community.”⁷⁶⁷ The “true modern utilitarian style” of the Williamsburg design also impressed abstract painter Hananiah Harari, who noted in *Art Front* that the project provided an “oasis” and that the apartments were “modern, beautiful,

⁷⁶³ Talbot Faulkner Hamlin, “New York Housing: Harlem River Homes and Williamsburg Houses,” *Pencil Points* 19.5 (May 1938), p. 288. Williamsburg is also discussed in Lewis Mumford, “The Skyline: The New Order,” *New Yorker*, 26 February 1938; Richard Pommer, “Architecture of Urban Housing in the US during the Early 1930s,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* (December 1978), p. 251; Robert A. M. Stern, et al., “We’ll Have the Bronx, and Staten Island, Too: Toward Suburbia,” *New York 1930: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Two World Wars* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), pp. 479-503; Stern, “With Rhetoric: The New York Apartment House,” *VIA IV: Culture and the Social Vision* (Pittsburgh: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), p. 100; and Peter Rowe, *Modernity and Housing* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993).

⁷⁶⁴ Hamlin, “New York Housing,” p. 286.

⁷⁶⁵ Hamlin, “Architecture” in Frank Vizetelly, ed., *International Yearbook 1937* (New York: Funk and Wagnall’s, 1938), p. 40; “New York Housing,” p. 286.

⁷⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

⁷⁶⁷ Walter Gropius as cited in H. I. Brock, “A Modernist Scans Our Skyline,” *NYT* 11 April 1937.

functional dwellings fit for human habitation at prices workers can afford to pay.”⁷⁶⁸ As the first tenants took up residence, the *Brooklyn Eagle* announced with pride that the Williamsburg houses were “one of the most perfect home sites in the world . . . an eagerly sought spot to live.”⁷⁶⁹

Significantly for the mural commissions at Williamsburg, Lescaze was also a practicing artist. Prior to making a reputation for himself in architecture, he had “used painting as a sort of compensatory medium, putting on canvas what he wasn’t yet allowed to put into buildings.”⁷⁷⁰ He exhibited his work on several occasions, including shows at the Whitney and the Montross Gallery, and participated in a show with the American Abstract Artists’ group in 1939.⁷⁷¹ He was firmly committed to achieving a rapprochement between art and architecture and was an ardent champion of modernist muralism. Archival evidence demonstrates that Lescaze actively lobbied for the inclusion of murals at Williamsburg. In May 1936 he wrote to Cahill expressing his more general support for the FAP: “I can’t tell you how grateful I am to the stars which allowed me to find you and to have you show me the very interesting work which is being done by the Federal Art Project.”⁷⁷² Cahill responded in kind, thanking Lescaze for his “generous enthusiasm,” and mentioned that he had given Lescaze’s name to Barr for the planning of a new building for MoMA.⁷⁷³

Putting the full weight of his influence behind the modernist mural commissions for Williamsburg, Lescaze reported to Shreve in August 1936 that, following a review meeting with the rest of the architectural team, the sketches had been approved. In a letter to Post written a few months later, he then attempted to avoid any opposition from Housing Authority officials.⁷⁷⁴ Apparently anticipating objections to the modernist designs (some of which were entirely abstract), Lescaze confirmed that

⁷⁶⁸ Hananiah Harari, “Who Killed the Home Planning Project?” *AF* (November 1937), pp. 15; 13. On Harari see the Montclair Art Museum’s *Hananiah Harari: A Personal Synthesis*.

⁷⁶⁹ *Brooklyn Eagle*, 25 August 1937.

⁷⁷⁰ Coates, “Profiles, Modern,” p. 49.

⁷⁷¹ Lescaze to Bolotowsky, 23 June 1939, Bolotowsky papers, AAA, Reel N68.

⁷⁷² Lescaze to Cahill, 11 May 1936, NARA, RG 69.

⁷⁷³ Cahill to Lescaze, 15 May 1936. Lescaze did not receive the MoMA commission.

⁷⁷⁴ Lescaze to Shreve, 21 August 1936, NYCHAC.

Diller and the architects agreed that “at the end of eight hours spent among moving belts, machines and factory stacks, the painted images of more machines and factory stacks would be no comfort and would suggest no new and inviting horizon.”⁷⁷⁵ Alluding to the “new horizons” that could be discovered through federal art, Lescaze argued that “abstract and stimulating patterns in strong and beautiful colors would add to the enjoyment of the people who were to live in the Williamsburg Houses.”⁷⁷⁶ Further demonstrating his commitment to European ideas about modernism, in particular those espoused by Léger, he advocated a collaborative approach to the project. Echoing Léger’s demand for “an agreement among *the wall — the architect — the painter*” Lescaze insisted that the artists should be included in the planning process so that they could “relate [the murals] to the intention of the architecture.”⁷⁷⁷

Despite Lescaze’s support, the Williamsburg murals were not free from bureaucratic problems. The PWA’s housing director H. A. Gray initially approved all of the sketches in October 1936. He was willing to accept modernist and abstract forms as a suitable form of “decoration,” commenting that “The color and scale are excellent” and that he had “no objection to the abstract designs in view of the present trends in decoration in New York City if color and composition are good.”⁷⁷⁸ However, while he gave the go-ahead for the artists to proceed with completed studies, by December 1936 he directed the Authority to put a stop to all commissions when he learned their combined cost would be \$1000. Although this is astonishing, given that the estimated cost of the Williamsburg project was \$12.8 million, it may actually explain the reason why only six murals were completed. As Gray later stated, “I believe that the addition of appropriate murals and other decorative objects is very desirable in our public low rent housing projects, but they are not considered a necessity nor possible where any considerable expense is involved.”⁷⁷⁹

⁷⁷⁵ Lescaze to Post, 2 November 1936, NYCHAC.

⁷⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷⁷ Léger, “The Wall, the Architect, the Painter” (1924), reprinted in *Functions of Painting*, p. 97; Lescaze to Post, 2 November 1936, NYCHAC.

⁷⁷⁸ H. A. Gray to David Comstock, 1 October 1936, NYCHAC.

⁷⁷⁹ Gray to Ickes, 16 July 1937, NARA, RG 48.

This dilemma was obviously resolved to some degree by the following summer, as Lescaze was informed that the financial difficulties had been overcome and several of the sketches were once again in the process of full-size execution.⁷⁸⁰ However, when four panels by Criss, Davis, Swinden and Bolotowsky were submitted yet again to the Housing Authority for approval in July, only Criss's was approved; the other three were rejected.⁷⁸¹ Sharing Mayor La Guardia's earlier mystification with modernist painting, Ickes considered them to be "unintelligible and entirely lacking in decorative qualities."⁷⁸² As it now stands, mural sketches by Bowden, Browne, de Kooning, Matulka, and McNeil, all of which were entirely abstract, were never given final approval. Matulka's mural, which was apparently intended for a hallway and whose measurements have been recorded as 8 ¼ x 1 ½ feet, is the only Williamsburg commission for which no visual record has yet been found.⁷⁸³

Browne and de Kooning (who continued to work with the human figure throughout the 1930s) submitted sketches for abstractions comprised of both geometric and more organic elements disposed within shallow, compartmentalized spaces (figs 78 to 80). As Waldman observes, de Kooning's sketches indicate his familiarity with Gorky's work, and indeed the two artists were close during this period. In particular, de Kooning's *Study* (1935) (fig. 81), which brings together simple organic shapes laid flat against gridded planes that recall the compositional armature of Mondrian, is strikingly similar to Gorky's *Organization* (c.1933-1936) (fig. 82), which itself manifests close affinities with Picasso's interiors of the late 1920s, such as *The Studio* (1927-1928) (fig. 83).⁷⁸⁴ Following de Kooning's dismissal from the project because he was not a US citizen, Lee Krasner, a member of the AAA and a Trotskyist sympathizer, was assigned to finish the sketches in July 1937. Although the sketches have been lost, they were described as hard-edged but with a "Légeresque

⁷⁸⁰ Lescaze to Langdon, 28 June 1937, NYCHAC.

⁷⁸¹ Gray to Langdon, 27 July 1937, NYCHAC.

⁷⁸² Ickes as quoted in E. K. Burlew to Gray, 27 July 1937, NARA, RG 48.

⁷⁸³ See Patterson Sims in *Jan Matulka, 1890-1972*, p. 30.

⁷⁸⁴ Waldman, *Willem de Kooning* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988), p. 22. As Waldman notes, Picasso's studio interiors could have been seen first-hand by both Gorky and de Kooning at the Valentine Gallery.

biomorphism” and, as a later *Untitled Mural Study* demonstrates (fig. 84), her work at this time was close to that of de Kooning and Gorky.⁷⁸⁵ Bowden and McNeil (who had worked with Browne and de Kooning on the aborted French Line mural project with Léger) submitted abstract sketches that deployed an array of flat, interlocking shapes (figs 85 and 86). Eugene Morley was awarded a commission initially, but his more representational work depicting images of industrialized labour, whose aspect of social commentary brought it closer to the work of the Social Realists, was also rejected (figs 87 and 88).

Approaches to Modernism

Williamsburg is a site where, as Hemingway suggests, different conceptions of modernism “squared off.”⁷⁸⁶ Among the murals actually executed, the least abstract of all was Criss’s *Sixth Avenue ‘L’* (fig. 89), a New York street scene painted in a “cool and restrained” Precisionist idiom that apparently satisfied the conventional tastes of Ickes and the PWA officials.⁷⁸⁷ As one critic described it, Criss painted “unpeopled, mysterious streets in clear, high colors and with beautiful regard for architectural values, classical austerity and exquisite development of purely abstract design.”⁷⁸⁸ Like his earlier PWAP canvases, such as *Cityscape* (1934), his *Sixth Avenue El* focuses on urban subject matter and the “El” was a theme he revisited several times throughout the 1930s.⁷⁸⁹ With their vivid colours and schematic treatment of the contemporary environment, his streetscapes suggest the influence of Davis’s paintings of the late 1920s and early 1930s. In fact, Criss’s Williamsburg mural is similar in both content and formal treatment to Davis’s gouache (*New York Elevated*) (c.1931)

⁷⁸⁵ Although Krasner worked on the mural she never finished it; see Ellen Landau, *Lee Krasner: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), p. 64.

⁷⁸⁶ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 175.

⁷⁸⁷ Genauer, “Younger Painters in the East,” *Parnassus* 9.4 (April 1937), p. 17. Archival evidence suggests that Criss originally intended to execute four panels for the Williamsburg project; see Criss papers, AAA, Reel N70-34.

⁷⁸⁸ Genauer, “Young Painters,” p. 17.

⁷⁸⁹ For example Criss exhibited a canvas entitled *The El* at the Arts Students League in 1932 and later, in 1941, a version painted in 1939 was included in the exhibition *Contemporary Painting in the US* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

(fig. 90), which was on view at the Downtown Gallery in 1932.⁷⁹⁰

Swinden and Bolotowsky's murals, both *Untitled* (c.1939; 1936), synthesize the rectilinear aspects of Cubism with the softer, floating forms of Arp and Miró (figs 91 and 92).⁷⁹¹ As was characteristic of much New York abstraction during the latter half of the 1930s, they fuse abstract geometry with biomorphic elements and the murals are composed of large areas of bright, unmodulated colour. Both artists were members of the American Abstract Artists' group and Swinden, like Bolotowsky, attended the National Academy of Design, although he soon decided to enroll at the Art Students League instead, where many of his classes were lead by Hans Hofmann. Although Swinden rarely wrote about his work, which in this instance is comprised of elegantly calculated intervals of space and colour placed in counterpoint to achieve a rhythmic modulation of advancing and receding forms, his brief essay "On Simplification" (published in the AAA's 1938 yearbook) provides a succinct distillation of the formal concerns demonstrated in his mural: "We are moved not only by particular, or individual forms, but by the relationships between the particular forms and their significance as a unity."⁷⁹² He continued: "The particular forms give character and variety to the work; but, unless the particular forms function with relationship to one another, the work will have as little value as any object that functions only in parts but not as a unit."⁷⁹³

Bolotowsky, like Greene, had initially been assigned to the Teaching Division of the FAP, but applied for transfer to the Mural Division as it was well-known that it offered the most hospitable climate for modernists. While during the early 1930s

⁷⁹⁰ Troy previously noted the similarities between Criss's urban subject matter and Davis's Parisian streetscapes; see "The Williamsburg Housing Project Murals." pp. 22-23.

⁷⁹¹ It should be noted that Swinden's mural does not conform to his original conception. The changes he made, such as the addition of a black horizontal strip of canvas at the top and a wide, broken band of blue on the right, were probably in response to the demands of the space in which the mural was installed. Similarly, the two inserts of unpainted canvas in the upper right and left corners represent areas occupied by structural beams; see Barbara Dayer Gallati, *The Williamsburg Murals: A Rediscovery: Five Monumental Works from the 1930s by Ilya Bolotowsky, Balcomb Greene, Paul Kelppe, and Albert Swinden* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1990).

⁷⁹² Albert Swinden, "On Simplification," *American Abstract Artists: Three Yearbooks (1938, 1939, 1946)* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), p. 12.

⁷⁹³ *Ibid.*

Bolotowsky was aligned with the Expressionist movement and exhibited with The Ten, his work became what fellow-travelling modernist Jacob Kainen described as “aimlessly abstract” and by 1940 Bolotowsky dedicated his art to a strict Neo-Plasticism.⁷⁹⁴ As his Williamsburg mural demonstrates, by mid-decade he began to embrace the Cubist challenge to composition and spatial construction, while simultaneously becoming interested in more organic forms. His mural, which is entirely non-objective and which makes few concessions to naturalistic reference, is comprised of biomorphic and geometric elements clustered at the centre of an expansive light grey horizontal ground. Although the mural includes brown, tan, and grey elements, the emphasis on primary colours plus black and white owes debts to the palette of Mondrian, as do the rectilinear elements.

In contradistinction to the work of Swinden and Bolotowsky, Greene’s mural *Untitled* (c.1936) (fig. 93) is an uncompromising abstraction that bears no trace of anecdotal or naturalist elements that might suggest identifiable subject matter. He eliminated the biomorphic elements used by Bolotowsky and Swinden, preferring an aesthetic vocabulary comprised entirely of geometric shapes. Like Swinden, Greene emphasizes horizontals and verticals held in equilibrium close to the surface of the picture plane, again indicative of the influence of Mondrian. Employing a palette of cool, muted tones, he endeavoured to limit the tactile qualities of the brush and the vagaries of painterly expression by applying pigment with an air gun through stencils (fig. 94). While such a technique might be suitable to a vocabulary comprised of hard-edged planar geometry, the mechanical effect and complete lack of facture creates a spatial vacuum and an overriding sense of sterility.

Kelpe’s mural manifests yet another approach to abstraction. Born in Germany, he studied art in Hanover, where he quickly became acquainted with the abstract works of Schwitters, Kandinsky, and Soviet Constructivists such as El Lissitzky. He immigrated to the US in 1925, eventually settling in Chicago, where he worked on the

⁷⁹⁴ See Bolotowsky, “On Neoplasticism and My Own Work.”

PWAP and later joined the FAP in 1935.⁷⁹⁵ His PWAP paintings (figs 95 and 96) feature a series of machine-like forms set against a flattened ground of hard-edged industrial buildings. Each composition includes a lone human figure working in concert with a collection of gears and turbines such that the vision of modern industrial society is reminiscent of Léger. Once on the FAP, however, his more abstract works were regarded as unsuitable by his supervisors and he subsequently moved to New York, where he found employment under Diller in January 1936. Although he was initially assigned to collaborate with Davis on a joint mural, conflicts immediately arose and individual commissions were arranged.⁷⁹⁶ Such conflicts are not surprising given that there is no evidence to suggest that Kelpé, who was a charter member of the AAA and the group's treasurer for several years, aligned his approach to abstract form with the concerns of realism and he does not seem to have been associated with leftist politics. That being said, his *Untitled* (c.1938) (figs 97 and 98) is distinctive among the Williamsburg murals in that it manifests pronounced affinities with Lissitsky's *Prouns*. The two panels are comprised of strikingly coloured linear elements arrayed against a striped ground of greys, brown, and black. Suggesting axial rotation, the vivid formal arrangements recall three-dimensional projections or imagined constructions and feature overlapping and interpenetrating hard-edge geometric shapes set off by local areas of patterning.

Muralism on the Waterfront

Davis's *Swing Landscape* (1938) (fig. 99) is the most arresting and formally sophisticated of the Williamsburg murals.⁷⁹⁷ The underlying harbour scene is typical of his Gloucester imagery, where piers, wharfs, masts, and rigging dominate the composition of paintings such as *Waterfront* (1935) (fig. 100), painted under the

⁷⁹⁵ See the Krannert Art Museum's *Paul Kelpé: Abstractions and Constructions, 1925-1940*.

⁷⁹⁶ Kelpé to Dreier, 27 August 1936, The Société Anonyme Archives, Yale University, New Haven. Kelpé was close to Dreier and exhibited regularly with the Society of Independent Artists during the late 1920s; see also *Four Painters: Albers, Dreier, Drewes, Kelpé* (New York: Delphic Studios, 1936).

⁷⁹⁷ Davis completed a number of preparatory works for the mural, one of which is housed in the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., and two of which were exhibited in *Stuart Davis: Murals: An Exhibition of Related Studies, 1932-1957* in 1976 at the Zabriskie Gallery in New York; see Boyajian and Rutkoff, *Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 2, cat. nos 622-623; 1222-1224; and vol. 3, cat no. 1612. *Swing Landscape* served as the focal point for the exhibition *Stuart Davis and American Abstraction: A Masterpiece in Focus* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2005.

auspices of the FAP. However, whereas a seascape is still recognizable in *Waterfront*, Davis's paintings incorporated fewer vestiges of naturalistic picturing as the decade unfolded.

Falling less easily into Milton Brown's category of "Cubist-Realism," *Swing Landscape* displays a far greater emphasis on abstracting elements from the Gloucester environs. Spatial depth is all but eliminated and the harbour scene is camouflaged by a riotous assortment of anecdotal details rendered in high-keyed colour. As Sims points out, the central and right-hand sections of the tripartite composition, where the orange and red barber pole and brown ladder meet at an angle, are based on the 1934 PWAP composition *American Waterfront*.⁷⁹⁸ In the foreground of the mural Davis has dispersed lobster traps and other paraphernalia similar to that found in the contemporary *Art to the People — Get Pink Slips* (1937) (fig. 101), a variation on the same composition. The left-hand section of the mural is dominated by a collage of elements such as a mast, rigging, a chimney spewing red smoke, and a yellow house partially submerged by waves. To the right of the house are two posts, with the foreground featuring a section of chains, the top of a pulley, and two funnels, again similar to those in earlier Gloucester paintings. In the centre of the collage floats a green bowler hat like that found in his 1932 mural *Abstract Vision of New York*. The presence of such recurring elements attests to the fact that Davis, like Gorky, had developed a vocabulary of forms and compositional elements that he would recycle in the context of different images.

The title of *Swing Landscape* draws attention to Davis's abiding interest in popular culture. Announced with his *Tobacco* paintings of the early 1920s, such as *Lucky Strike* (1921) (fig. 102), which are derived from Synthetic Cubism, he consistently engaged the aesthetics of mass commercial culture.⁷⁹⁹ Inspired by the vibrant colour combinations adorning gas stations and five-and-dime stores, and keen to capture the high visibility of neon signs and billboards, his work of the 1930s continued to

⁷⁹⁸ Sims, *American Painter*, p. 238.

⁷⁹⁹ On the *Tobacco* series see Zabel, "Stuart Davis' Appropriation of Advertising: The Tobacco Series, 1921-1924," *American Art* 5.4 (Autumn 1991), 56-67; and Zabel, *Assembling Art*, 2004, pp. 63-82.

manifest his preoccupation with the forms of contemporary life. Like Brecht and Léger he insisted that if the artist was to communicate with the masses in any meaningful way, he needed to speak their language by adopting and enriching forms of expression that had been popularized for working-class consumers. As Brecht contended, popular art and realism were “natural allies.”⁸⁰⁰

Davis was also fascinated with jazz and the mural pays homage to swing, a big-band variant enjoying its “golden age” during the New Deal period.⁸⁰¹ His interest in jazz stretched back to his early training with the Ashcan School and as he later commented: “Jazz has been a continuous source of inspiration in my work from the very beginning for the simple reason that I regard it as the one American art which seemed to me to have the same quality of art that I found in the best modern European painting.”⁸⁰² Jazz musicians such as Duke Ellington, who merged folk elements of indigenous black experience with European compositional forms, offered Davis a model for effectively extending native traditions. As Lane observes, jazz “paralleled Davis’ own efforts to fuse modernist style with American subject matter into a new vernacular.”⁸⁰³ In fact Davis hired Ellington to perform at the opening of his exhibition at the Downtown Gallery in 1943 so that “guests would see how the irregular geometrical shapes and piebald color of his compositions . . . echo the rhythms and tempo of swing” (fig. 103).⁸⁰⁴ Evidently Davis concurred with Ellington: “It don’t mean a thing if ain’t got that swing,” a phrase he scrolled along the left side of *American Painting* (1932; reworked 1942-1954) (fig. 104).

During the late 1930s and early 1940s Davis increasingly directed attention to the connections between his painting and jazz. He frequently referenced musicians such as

⁸⁰⁰ Brecht, “Popularity and Realism,” pp. 80-81.

⁸⁰¹ On jazz in New York see Federal Writers’ Project, *New York Panorama: A Companion to the WPA Guide to New York City* (1938; New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. 241-265. On the influence of jazz on American artists see Donna Cassidy, *Painting the Musical City: Jazz and Cultural Identity in American Art, 1910-1940* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1997), pp. 69-80 and Zabel, *Assembling Art*, 2004, pp. 133-151.

⁸⁰² Davis, “The Place of Painting in Contemporary Culture: The Easel is a Cool Spot at an Arena of Hot Events,” *Art News* 56 (June 1957), pp. 29-30.

⁸⁰³ Lane, *Art and Theory*, 1978, p. 76.

⁸⁰⁴ Genauer, “Two Americans Give Solo Shows,” *NYT*, 6 February 1943.

Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway and Earl Hines in his notes, with the latter's "hot piano" being cited as one of the things that made him want to paint.⁸⁰⁵ He often compared his introduction to modernism at the Armory Show with the experience of listening to jazz in Newark or Harlem: "It gave me the same kind of excitement I got from the numerical precisions of the Negro piano players in the Negro Saloons."⁸⁰⁶ However, while an earlier painting entitled *The Backroom* (1913) (fig. 105) does depict a musician performing, by the 1930s he was no longer interested in literally picturing jazz. Moreover, although his next FAP mural, executed in 1939 for the Municipal Broadcasting Company's Radio Station WNYC (figs 106 and 107) includes stylized versions of a saxophone and clarinet (combined, no less, with a vignette of Gloucester), the Williamsburg mural's engagement with jazz is of a different order, causing scholars such as Rudi Blesh to completely misinterpret it because he could find nothing overtly musical in the iconography.⁸⁰⁷

Following a discussion of the relations between Davis's art and jazz, Blesh observed that "One can look in vain in this vast, packed canvas for anything literally pertaining to music — not a saxophone, not a single hemi demisemiquaver."⁸⁰⁸ But this was not the point. Just as Gorky's Newark murals did not seek to engage flight in a mimetic fashion but instead selected motifs and recombined them in a modernist idiom, *Swing Landscape*, with its free arrangements of colour and form, captures the

⁸⁰⁵ Davis, "The Cube Root," p. 34. On jazz see, for example, Davis papers, 26 July 1939; undated 1939; 10 April 1941; September 1941; 18 January 1942; Easter 1942.

⁸⁰⁶ Davis, "Autobiography" (1945) in Kelder, *Stuart Davis*, pp. 23-24.

⁸⁰⁷ Davis's working notes on the WNYC mural (23 March 1939) are reprinted in *ibid.*, p. 92. Modernist murals for WNYC were also executed by Byron Browne, Louis Ferstadt, Schanker, and John von Wicht, all of whom, with the exception of von Wicht, were member of the Artists' Congress and active in Popular Front initiatives. Krasner was invited to submit sketches for an additional abstract mural in 1941. The mural remained unexecuted because by March 1942 the FAP became the Graphic Section of the War Services Program. Although these murals further demonstrate that abstract form (whether realist or non-objective) was less marginal to the art of the 1930s than standard accounts suggest and, furthermore, that modernism was in no way a homogenous category during this period, they do not contribute anything new to my argument and thus, due to limitations of space, will not be discussed here. Von Wicht's mural was restored in 1985 and now hangs in the Brooklyn Public Library at Grand Army Plaza and Schanker's mural remains in situ in the twenty-fifth floor lobby of the Municipal Office Building. However, in a testament to the lack of value accorded to these early abstractions, Browne's mural was destroyed during building renovations in the 1990s. Archival material on these murals may be found in the records of the Art Commission of the City of New York.

⁸⁰⁸ Rudi Blesh, *Stuart Davis* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), p. 55. On Davis and jazz see also O'Doherty, *American Masters*, pp. 47; 75-78.

improvisational aspects of “hot” jazz, which relies upon a virtuoso embroidering of a given rhythm — breaking it down, complicating it, and pushing it to its limits. Both the Newark and Williamsburg murals, with their networks of elisions and abrupt transitions, take an established theme and subject them to processes of extraction, recombination, and accumulation. As John Lucas suggests with respect to Davis’s technique, “in its arbitrary repetition, alteration and superimposition of forms, [*Swing Landscape*] offers something comparable to Armstrong’s variations on a theme as well as his interpolation of fragments from other tunes.”⁸⁰⁹ Davis’s relationship with swing, as Lane further observes, was thus one of structural and technical analogies. True to form Davis argued that such analogies created “something very real in the painting.”⁸¹⁰

Davis’s interest in swing music had political resonance during the 1930s. He shared with many musicians a commitment to artistic freedom that, as Lane suggests, insisted upon “the artist’s liberty to transform source material, emphasizing the prime importance of innovative formal relations.”⁸¹¹ Swing was also deeply tied to the political and cultural milieux of the Roosevelt era, symbolizing a major reorientation in American national culture and epitomizing a new model of democratic pluralism that sought to enfranchise racial and ethnic minorities. While blacks in northern cities had traditionally supported the Republicans (the party of Lincoln and emancipation), rather than the Democrats (the party of Southerners and white supremacy), by 1936 the majority of blacks now joined working-class whites in backing Roosevelt for another term, with gallup polls estimating that seventy-six per cent of the black vote went to FDR.⁸¹² Within the international context, jazz music, like modernism, was being suppressed in Germany and Japan, with the result that swing was embraced during the late 1930s as a symbol of the American way of life — one premised upon democracy, tolerance, and freedom of expression.

⁸⁰⁹ John Lucas, “The Fine Art Jive of Stuart Davis,” *Arts* 31 (September 1957), p. 34.

⁸¹⁰ Davis as cited in *ibid.*, p. 32.

⁸¹¹ Lane in Sims, *American Painter*, p. 76.

⁸¹² Badger, *The New Deal*, p. 251. For more on the status of blacks under the New Deal see Steve Valocchi, “The Racial Basis of Capitalism and the State, and the Impact of the New Deal on African Americans,” *Social Problems* 41.3 (August 1994), pp. 347-362.

Swing also had a decidedly “Red tinge” during the 1930s and, as Michael Denning points out, was linked with the radical currents of the Popular Front and the New Deal.⁸¹³ With the Party now assuming a more conciliatory stance towards American popular culture and actively encouraging inter-racial and inter-class struggle in an effort to create a united front, the link between the left and swing became official policy.⁸¹⁴ As Denning asserts, it was “a mass commercial culture that forged an ‘American’ style out of the city styles of the black and ethnic working-classes.”⁸¹⁵ Although many clubs and bands remained segregated, the efforts of prominent bandleaders such as Count Basie and Benny Goodman toward integration fostered a mixed cultural movement that went an unprecedented distance in bridging the gap between races and ethnicities. Melosh has pointed out that “integration remained a code for radical politics” during the Popular Front period, with Café Society, the first racially-integrated cabaret outside of Harlem, opening in Greenwich Village in 1938.⁸¹⁶ The club was a product of the alliance between jazz and the Popular Front and represented what Denning describes as “a remarkable synthesis of the radical political cabarets of Berlin and Paris with the African American jazz clubs and revues of Harlem.”⁸¹⁷ The idea for the nightclub originated with Browder as a fund-raising initiative and the premises (which were adorned with murals satirizing upper-class pretensions by artists such as Dehn, Gropper, and Refregier) served as a site where the tradition of the political cabaret was transplanted to the US.⁸¹⁸ Known to host a range of illustrious guests including Eleanor Roosevelt (herself an outspoken opponent of segregation) and establishing itself as a sort of “Weimar on the Hudson,” Café Society alternated avant- garde theatrical experiments in the tradition of Brecht, Erwin Piscator and Kurt Weill, with jazz and swing. Given that Davis was a regular at venues

⁸¹³ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 283; on the culture of swing see pp. 283-361.

⁸¹⁴ Lewis Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 132; see the chapter “Swing Left: The Politics of Race and Culture in the Swing Era,” pp. 120-149.

⁸¹⁵ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 330.

⁸¹⁶ Melosh, *Engendering Culture*, p. 91.

⁸¹⁷ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 324.

⁸¹⁸ Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream*, pp. 144-146.

where live jazz was performed, it is not unthinkable that he encountered Brechtian cabaret here.⁸¹⁹

As ideologues for both the Popular Front and the New Deal publicized their support for the “forgotten man,” there was a broad left-democratic commitment to swing as part of an authentic “people’s culture.”⁸²⁰ “Jazz — especially racially integrated jazz — was,” as one music critic later concluded, “on the front line of social change along with the causes of anti-fascism, the New Deal, the labour movement and the Scottsboro case.”⁸²¹ More recently, Lewis Erenberg has suggested that “the growing awareness that swing was American music — and that its players, black and white, deserved to be heard by whites and blacks equally, was a part of the excitement of swing.”⁸²² By the end of the decade many leftists held that swing was “an authentic folk and protest music” and benefit dances for *New Masses*, the Workers’ School, the Young Communist League, along with Party fund-raisers for the defense of Ethiopia and Loyalist Spain, invariably included swing bands, not just for the crowds they would draw, but as exemplars of the democratic ideals being defended.⁸²³

Given Davis’s desire to create a realist art that was both popular and accessible, the issue of audience is paramount to any evaluation of the mural. As Lovell asserts, “The question of audience is critical in assessing the politics of a text, and the text’s signifying practice must always be related to the requirements and characteristics of that audience as well as to the meaning and effects which it aims to produce.”⁸²⁴ Bearing Lovell’s comments in mind, I want to argue that *Swing Landscape* was tailor-made for the inhabitants at Williamsburg, both in terms of its referencing of contemporary jazz and its inclusion of a harbour scene. To begin with, Williamsburg was a racially and ethnically diverse neighbourhood known for its “large, polyglot

⁸¹⁹ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, pp. 324-326.

⁸²⁰ Erenberg, *Swingin’ the Dream*, p. 122.

⁸²¹ John McDonough, “John Hammond Rebel with a Cause,” *Jazz Times* (January 1987) as cited in *ibid.*, p. 125.

⁸²² *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁸²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 132-135.

⁸²⁴ Lovell, *Pictures of Reality*, p. 87.

population.”⁸²⁵ The opening of the Williamsburg Bridge in 1903 and the resultant influx of immigrant families from over-crowded Manhattan was followed in 1915 by the “Great Migration,” a period continuing into the 1930s which witnessed the arrival of thousands of African Americans from the rural South.⁸²⁶ The site for the housing project was also directly adjacent to Stuyvesant Heights, which, following Harlem, was home to New York’s largest African American population.⁸²⁷ As such, the ideals of racial integration and the democratic values associated with swing would have had a particularly powerful resonance here. Furthermore, given that Brooklyn was situated along thirty-three miles of developed waterfront, which included huge shipping terminals, warehouses, and a Navy Yard, Davis’s choice of a harbour scene was far from arbitrary and would have been particularly topical to project residents. Indeed, in a notebook entry of August 1937, Davis recorded going to the proposed site and wandering around the waterfront in search of material for sketching.⁸²⁸

Perhaps more significantly, at least for the political implications of the mural, many Williamsburg residents were also employed within waterfront industries, with the activities of the Navy Yard alone requiring the services of about 10,000 labourers by 1938. Of these 10,000 labourers, at least one-third were WPA workers and thus, one might surmise, supporters of the New Deal.⁸²⁹ According to Badger, not only were federal workers grateful for employment opportunities, thus making them amongst the most devoted admirers of the President, but their loyalty to Roosevelt was “reinforced by the emergence of organized labour as a key element in the new Democratic Party.”⁸³⁰

During the period of the mural’s commissioning and execution, the waterfront was a focus for leftist activity, with Communists exercising a significant degree of influence

⁸²⁵Federal Writers’ Project, *The WPA Guide to New York City*, p. 455.

⁸²⁶*Ibid.*

⁸²⁷*Ibid.*

⁸²⁸ Davis calendars, 28 August 1937 as cited in Boyajian and Rutkoff, *Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 3, p. 293.

⁸²⁹ Federal Writers’ Project, *The WPA Guide to New York City*, p. 451. For a general overview of the role of the port see Federal Writers’ Project, *New York Panorama*, pp. 325-345.

⁸³⁰ Badger, *The New Deal*, p. 250.

by taking the lead in developing maritime unions. Although, as Louis Adamic points out, many waterfront unions already existed, most, including the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA), were "out and out rackets" run by the corrupt American Federation of Labor (AFL).⁸³¹ Seeking to increase wages, improve working conditions, and replace the degradation of the morning "shape-up" through the recognition of regulated hiring-halls, sea and shoreside workers on the West Coast followed the lead of union organizer Harry Bridges, who was closely associated with the Party. By 1932, Bridges and his rank-and-file group, who functioned as a branch of the ILA, had gained control of the unions in San Francisco and within a year installed a well-administered and democratically-run alternative.⁸³² However, following an endless stream of disputes with marine employers punctuated by periodic outbursts of violence, the major shipping interests, supported by the autocratic AFL leadership, made the issue national in January 1936. It was at this time that ongoing labour disputes culminated in an ILA general strike that shut down nearly all ports in the country for more than three months, resulting in the loss of hundreds of millions of dollars in trade turnover and wages.⁸³³

In contradistinction to the pronounced development of radical unionism among longshoremen on the West Coast during the 1930s, the same period was marked by the persistence of conservative unionism in the East. Collective bargaining in the longshore industry in New York had long since received institutional accommodation.⁸³⁴ As a result, in the midst of the increased labour militancy that

⁸³¹ Louis Adamic, *My America* (New York: Harper, 1938), p. 368.

⁸³² On the San Francisco strike see Milton, *The Politics of U.S. Labor*, pp. 40-52.

⁸³³ On Harry Bridges and the maritime unions see Adamic, *My America*, pp. 367-378. For a general history of waterfront activities during this period, albeit with a pronounced emphasis on the Pacific coast see Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) and Howard Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets? The Making of Radical and Conservative Unions on the Waterfront* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), especially pp. 120-125 for activities in New York. For a more colourful and amusing account of the leading persona narrated by a deeply anti-Communist liberal journalist see Murray Kempton, *Part of Our Time: Some Ruins and Monuments of the Thirties* (1955; New York: New York Review of Books, 1998), pp. 83-104.

⁸³⁴ Although the focus of this book is the postwar era, an excellent overview of 1930s is provided in the first chapter of Vernon Jensen, *Strife on the Waterfront: The Port of New York Since 1945* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974), pp. 13-35.

marked the thirties, strike action to gain recognition was not needed on the East Coast, as it was in the longshore industry in Pacific ports. Yet while the ILA did not require the new guarantees provided for under the National Industrial Recovery Act and the Wagner Act (passed in 1933 and 1935 respectively), this alone does not explain the relative inactivity of New York marine workers during a period when radical unionism was developing massively throughout the rest of the nation. More to the point is that on the Atlantic coast ILA President Joseph Ryan was a fanatical anti-Communist. By mid-decade Ryan was sharing his convention platforms with some of America's staunchest supporters of Hitler and Mussolini. Furthermore, he maintained order on the docks by employing some of the nation's most notorious gangsters and ex-convicts as "union organizers" to police the waterfront. Beginning in 1927, when he was elected to the presidency of the ILA, and continuing until 1942, when his position was ceremonially extended for life, "King Joe" ensured that there was not a single union-authorized strike in the Port of New York.⁸³⁵ As such, with Ryan at the helm, the late 1920s and early 1930s were years of extreme quiescence among maritime workers on the East Coast. Even the onset of the Depression did not trigger a significant wave of protest activity. The initiative for the formation of a new union came not from the waterfront's rank-and-file but, as Bruce Nelson points out, from the CPUSA.⁸³⁶ Although there already existed nuclei on some docks, a report on "Problems of Party Growth in New York" of 1936 flagged up the fact that "more attention has to be paid by us to concentration in this industry" and the Party was particularly keen to actively build a new union under more radical leadership.⁸³⁷

By mid-decade the East Coast ILA had, according to many members, degenerated into little more than "a dues collection agency" whose extensive underworld connections and corrupt collaborations with ship-owners led to the formation of "action committees" throughout the port.⁸³⁸ By the end of 1936 two important locals had elected "anti-Ryan progressives" and that autumn Bridges was invited to New York by

⁸³⁵ Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets?* p. 15.

⁸³⁶ Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, p. 79.

⁸³⁷ Max Steinberg, "Problems of Party Growth in the New York District," *The Communist* 15.7 (July 1936), p. 649.

⁸³⁸ Kimeldorf, *Red or Rackets?* p. 122.

striking East Coast seamen. Hours before Bridges addressed a capacity crowd of 17,000 maritime workers at Madison Square Gardens, he was called to ILA headquarters where Ryan dismissed him as West Coast union organizer. With Ryan on the defensive, Bridges repeatedly stressed the importance of inter-coastal unity and pledged his full support to New York longshoremen if they decided “to join the fight with your brothers” on the Pacific.”⁸³⁹

The struggles of the maritime unions were well-publicized during this period and would have been known first-hand among dockside workers in Brooklyn. Union members in New York were drawn from waterfront communities such as Williamsburg, where Communists were by far the most outspoken advocates of racial equality, consistently fighting for the rights of black workers. That Davis was also aware of these issues during the planning and execution of *Swing Landscape* is evinced by his participation in An American Group’s *Waterfront Art Show* in February 1937, to which he contributed a surprisingly brutal gouache on paper entitled *Waterfront Demonstration* (1936) (fig. 108). Long mistitled *Artists Against War and Fascism*, the image depicts what Jerome Klein described in the *New York Post* as “robot figures in police uniforms cracking down on a lone demonstrator.”⁸⁴⁰ It is one of the few works executed by Davis that takes labour as its explicit subject, although that same year he also executed the gouache *Arts to the People — Get Pink Slips* (1937), whose title was taken from a newspaper headline transcribed within the composition. His interest in activities on the docks is further demonstrated by an oil on canvas entitled *The Terminal* (1937) (fig. 109), which pictures longshoremen loading cargo, and *New York Waterfront* (1938) (fig. 110). That Davis saw a direct connection between the concerns of artists and those of other workers is evident in an earlier oil on canvas painted under the FAP and allocated to Evander Childs High School in the Bronx. Entitled *Composition* (1935) (fig. 111), it combines traditional symbols of the

⁸³⁹ Bridges as cited in *ibid.*, p. 123.

⁸⁴⁰ Jerome Klein, [Review of *Waterfront Art Show*], *New York Post*, 20 February 1937. While Davis gave the title *Waterfront Demonstration* in the exhibition, it has only recently been identified as the painting known as *Artists Against War and Fascism*. A similar gouache on paper that deals with the same theme is known only through a photograph; see Boyajian and Rutkoff, *Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 2, pp. 620-621.

fine arts, such as the palette and classical bust, with tools of the manual and mechanical trades.⁸⁴¹

The *Waterfront Art Show* was comprised of 126 works in various media by 107 artists and was co-sponsored by An American Group and the Marine Workers Committee. Held at the New School for Social Research, it was lionized by the *Sunday Worker* as an event of “tremendous educational and social significance” in that it was “the first important mass art exhibition in this country with the definite aim of supporting the rank and file of labor.”⁸⁴² As Ernst Brace later noted in the *Magazine of Art*, “the seaman’s strike was focusing public interest upon this aspect of city life” and members of the Group wanted to take some form of “united action” in order to demonstrate their solidarity.⁸⁴³ When Bridges returned to the East Coast for a second time in the autumn of 1937 (this time as President of the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen’s Union and affiliated with the CIO), the situation on the New York waterfront looked more promising.⁸⁴⁴ Representatives from eleven locals had formally endorsed the organizational principles of the CIO and Brooklyn’s rank-and-file were now leading the anti-Ryan movement, finding themselves described by one field organizer as “wild and rarin’ to go.”⁸⁴⁵ Such optimism was, however, to prove short-lived. Ryan’s gunmen went to work in 1939 and the threat of physical violence effectively silenced the chorus of voices calling for reform, enforcing the unquestioned authority of an utterly corrupt, conservative, and racketeering leadership.⁸⁴⁶

⁸⁴¹ On the iconography see Maria Caudill Dennison, “Stuart Davis, Artists’ Rights and Cigars: La Corona as the Source for ‘Composition’ (1935),” *Burlington Magazine* 150 (June 2008), pp. 471-473.

⁸⁴² “Marine Art,” *Sunday Worker*, 28 February 1937. On An American Group, Inc. and the *Waterfront Art Show* see Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 134.

⁸⁴³ Brace, “An American Group, Inc., pp. 274; 271.

⁸⁴⁴ Interestingly, Davis executed a small gouache on paper entitled *Daily Tribune and CIO* (Private collection), which features “CIO” inscribed across the lower central portion of the composition. While Boyajian and Rutkoff, *Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 2, p. 581 date the work to c.1931 on stylistic grounds, the 1967 stock list of the Downtown Gallery, which dates the painting to c.1936, is more accurate given that the CIO was not established until 1935.

⁸⁴⁵ Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets?* p. 124.

⁸⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

Prior to Ryan's "campaign of terror," the *Waterfront Art Show* served as one means for leftists to support the emergent rank-and-file movement on the docks. Although Davis's contribution was not immediately appreciated by the longshoremen, *New Masses* welcomed the "industrial exhibition" for enabling "increased contact with a broader audience" and for "defin[ing] in concrete terms the relations between art and work."⁸⁴⁷ Similarly, the *Daily Worker* lauded the show for unequivocally demonstrating the "unity between artist and worker" by giving marine workers an opportunity to purchase "a variety of art that has a real relationship to their jobs and daily life."⁸⁴⁸ Given Davis's highly visible position within the Artists' Union, it is my contention that his participation in the show should be aligned with the efforts on the part of leftists to seek support among the organized working-class.

As Schapiro advised in a lecture delivered to a convention of Unions from the eastern states held in May 1936, although federal patronage constituted "an immense step toward a public art and the security of the artist's profession," given the impermanence of government support, artists needed to make contact with a broader public in order to successfully lobby for the continuation of such patronage. Schapiro's lecture, which was published under the title "The Public Use of Art" in the autumn issue of *Art Front*, constitutes what, as Hemingway observes, is surely the most sophisticated critical evaluation of the New Deal art project at the time ⁸⁴⁹ According to Schapiro, artists could significantly extend their audience "with the support of the organized working class."⁸⁵⁰ However, if the workers were to "lend their strength," then the artists needed to "present a program for a public art which will reach the masses of the people."⁸⁵¹ If "they simply produce pictures to decorate the offices of municipal and state officials . . . then their art has little interest to the

⁸⁴⁷ Leonard Sparks, "Waterfront Art Show," *NM* 22 (16 February 1937), p. 17. Although Sparks refers to Davis's *Coffee Pot* when referencing the response of the longshoremen, Hemingway is almost certainly correct to speculate that Sparks was talking about the 1935 exhibition; see *Artists on the Left*, note 55, p. 307. For a review of the first exhibition see Kainen, "Waterfront Art Show," *DW* 19 December 1935.

⁸⁴⁸ Kainen, "Longshoremen are Critics at Waterfront Art Exhibit," *DW* 16 February 1937.

⁸⁴⁹ Hemingway, "Meyer Schapiro and Marxism," p. 18. Schapiro, "The Public Use of Art," *AF* 2.10 (November 1936), pp. 4-6.

⁸⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

workers.”⁸⁵² Offering a valuable assessment of the wider issues surrounding the audience for art in modern capitalist societies, Schapiro argued that a truly public art was a social and economic question: “It is not separate from the achievement of well-being for everyone: it is not separate from the achievement of social equality.”⁸⁵³

Although the Artists’ Union had already begun courting the AFL as early as the spring of 1935, later becoming affiliated with the CIO in January 1938, it pursued further opportunities for collaboration with working-class groups in the aftermath of the convention.⁸⁵⁴ Working under the assumption that leverage for expanding and stabilizing federal patronage would be strengthened by connecting with a broader working-class base, the Union subsequently established the Public Use of Arts Committee.⁸⁵⁵ Helen Harrison claims that the Committee was only given “guarded approval” by the FAP, but both Cahill and McMahon were sponsors of the initiative, and the Committee was described in project literature as dedicated to “devoting its efforts to expanding the services of the Federal Art Projects in order to satisfy greater sections of the population than have been served heretofore.”⁸⁵⁶ The formation of the Committee was announced in the December 1936 issue of *Art Front* and members immediately began approaching trade unions to see if they would be interested in Project artworks. The best-known instance of such collaboration was the unrealized Subway Art Project, where artists proposed to decorate the city’s subway stations in order “to show their sympathy with the blue-collar rank and file of the Transport Workers Union.”⁸⁵⁷

⁸⁵² *Ibid.*

⁸⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

⁸⁵⁴ The Artists’ Union was too small to receive its own charter and was absorbed into the United Office and Professional Workers and renamed the United American Artists, Local 60. See “Artists and AFL,” *AF* 1.5 (May 1935), pp. 3-4 and “The Union Applies for an AFL Charter,” *AF* 1.7 (July 1935), p. 2.

⁸⁵⁵ On the Public Use of Art Committee see “To the FAP Workers: A Statement by the Public Use of Art Committee,” *AF* (June-July 1937), pp. 6-7; Weinstock [Humboldt], “Public Art in Practice,” *AF* 2.11 (December 1936), pp. 8-10; and Robert Godson, “A Project for the People,” *AF* 3.3-4 (May 1937), pp. 10-11.

⁸⁵⁶ Helen Harrison, “Subway Art and the Public Use of Arts Committee,” *AAAJ* 21.2 (1981), p. 4. The names of Cahill and McMahon appear on the Committee’s official letterhead; statement printed in an untitled, undated report, NARA, RG 69.

⁸⁵⁷ On the Subway Project see “Art to Go Underground in New York,” *DW*, 10 February 1938; “Transport Union Approves Art for New York Subway Stations,” *DW*, 10 April 1938; and Harrison, “Subway Art,” pp. 2-12.

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If, as I am arguing, Davis was indeed seeking to bring his art to a radicalized audience and appeal to their interests, his decision to use a harbour scene as the focal point for both *Waterfront Demonstration* and *Swing Landscape* may be interpreted as a means by which to demonstrate his solidarity with marine workers and, in Schapiro's words, to produce an art "in which the workers . . . will find their own experiences presented."⁸⁵⁸ This is not, however, to suggest that Davis's position was cognate with Schapiro's and in his personal notes Schapiro was frequently the target of his rancor. To begin with, Davis was firmly committed to the maintenance and extension of the FAP (as demonstrated in his support of the Federal Arts Bill) and did not appreciate Schapiro's scorn for the projects, which the latter denounced in *Art Front* as "instruments of a class."⁸⁵⁹ Moreover, although such projects are inconceivable under a Republican administration, Schapiro argued with withering contempt that they "would have solicited essentially similar art, though it might have assigned them to other painters."⁸⁶⁰ Serving as a smoke-screen, government patronage and cooperation between artists and unions actually served to "divert the attention of the artist and the members of the unions from the harsh realities of class government and concealed dangers of crisis, war, and fascist oppression."⁸⁶¹ Turning his attention specifically to federal murals, Schapiro condemned them as "rooted in naïve, sentimental ideas of social reality" that could not help but "betray the utmost banality and poverty of invention."⁸⁶²

In addition to their differences of opinion over the issue of federal patronage, Davis did not approve of Schapiro's position on aesthetics either. While it could be argued that Davis's response could, in part, be understood as a straightforward corollary to his characterization of Schapiro as "a Trotskyist" and, in part, to his failure to fully comprehend Schapiro's standpoint on artistic matters, his stance affords insights into

⁸⁵⁸ Schapiro, "The Public Use of Art," p. 177.

⁸⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁸⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 178-179.

⁸⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 179.

his own position. In castigating Schapiro's views on social art as underpinned by a crude "mechanical materialism" Davis differentiated his thinking on artistic matters from orthodox Stalinist critics (whose calls for a more illustrational art he sometimes mistakenly ascribed to Schapiro); at the same time, he criticized Schapiro as an "idealist" in relation to modernism and thereby simultaneously demonstrated important differences from other champions of modernist art (namely those committed to non-objectivity).⁸⁶³

Taking Schapiro's position on New Deal art first, one could argue that he was not against federal patronage per se but was suggesting that unless such patronage was accompanied by more sweeping changes in the social and political field then it merely provided a "temporary ease and opportunity for work," leaving unresolved an economic crisis that was endemic to capitalism and which would soon strangle the artist once again.⁸⁶⁴ However, while the New Deal and its cultural projects did not fundamentally alter the gross inequalities between classes, he did not support the CPUSA either. In fact, as Hemingway points out, Schapiro's disenchantment with the Communist movement came as a result of the Party's adoption of the Popular Front and its endorsement of the New Deal, a turnaround that issued in a shift to a class collaborationist line. For Schapiro, this led to what he viewed as a jettisoning of the doctrine of revolutionary art for a compromised and opportunistic notion of "people's culture."⁸⁶⁵

However, while Davis similarly affirmed that the rights of the proletariat were to be "won first in the political and economic fields, not in the field of culture," he was nonetheless quick to point out that "We have not arrived at a classless society yet."⁸⁶⁶ So even though Davis never agreed with the Party on aesthetic matters, at this point he still recognized its leadership in the political field and was a supporter of both the New

⁸⁶³ Davis dismissed Schapiro, along with Greene, as a Trotskyist in his notes on 9 March 1938. He labelled Schapiro a "mechanical materialist" on several occasions; see, for example, Davis papers, 27 August 1937.

⁸⁶⁴ Schapiro, "Public Use of Art," p. 179.

⁸⁶⁵ Hemingway, "Meyer Schapiro: Marxism, Science and Art," p. 137.

⁸⁶⁶ Davis papers, 9 March 1938.

Deal and the Popular Front. Taking aim at Schapiro's notion that proletarian art could only exist in a classless society — a notion which Burck had already taken Schapiro to task for in *New Masses* — Davis argued that proletarian culture would emerge through “opportunities [for] the proletariat to participate in culture,” with the federal art projects providing a landmark example of such opportunities.⁸⁶⁷ Furthermore, by fostering proletarian culture the subject matter and form of art would also develop and any leftist critic, namely Schapiro, who demanded “that development before the material basis for its existence exists . . . [was] guilty of contempt for art itself.”⁸⁶⁸

Davis also did not approve of Schapiro's perspective on artistic matters. Although Schapiro acknowledged the importance of modernist formal developments and approvingly hailed “French art” as “technically far superior” to American painting, unlike Davis he did not deem artistic form to be radical in and of itself.⁸⁶⁹ For Schapiro, this was demonstrated by the *International Style* exhibition, which served as a compelling example that progressive technical developments were not ineluctably tied to progressive cultural values and could just as easily be embraced as the “newest fad” by the exploiting class if not implemented and instrumentalized within the context of a socialist society.⁸⁷⁰ This view was reiterated in “The Social Bases of Art,” a lecture he delivered at the Artists' Congress in February 1936, where Davis (as Secretary of the organization) was certainly in attendance.⁸⁷¹ As Schapiro affirmed, formal strategies were vehicles for the revolutionary will and, depending upon the specific historical context in which they were deployed, “the social origins of such forms of modern art do not in themselves permit one to judge this art as good or bad.”⁸⁷² For Davis, this was hardly the resounding endorsement for modernist form that he sought, and he criticized Schapiro for placing too much emphasis on external

⁸⁶⁷ Burck's comment was made in response to Schapiro's damning review of the JRC's *Social Viewpoint in Art* exhibition in 1933; see Burck's “Sectarianism in Art;” Davis papers, 9 March 1938.

⁸⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶⁹ Schapiro [Kwait], “The New Architecture,” p. 23. Prompted by MoMA's Matisse retrospective in 1932, he also wrote an article on “Matisse and Impressionism” for a magazine published by Columbia University; see *Androcles* 1.1 (February 1932), pp. 21-36.

⁸⁷⁰ Schapiro [Kwait], “The New Architecture,” p. 23.

⁸⁷¹ Schapiro, “The Social Bases of Art” (1936), reprinted in *Worldview in Painting — Art and Society* (New York: George Braziller, 1999), pp. 119-128.

⁸⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 127.

social relations “with complete disregard for the concrete nature of existing art directions.”⁸⁷³ Moreover, as Davis charged in a particularly vitriolic assessment of Schapiro’s “Nature of Abstract Art,” which appeared in *Marxist Quarterly* in early 1937, his position was idealist in that it failed to grasp the positive values of modernist practices and reduced it to an expression of the socially-isolated artist.

According to Davis, Schapiro was an idealist because he failed to recognize “the social meaning of the function of abstract art itself,” which was even “more misleading because it wears a materialist cloak when it affirms the social basis of art.”⁸⁷⁴ What Schapiro also seemed to ignore was the issue of quality. Throughout the decade Davis repeatedly asserted that an art of genuine quality, which the masses had a right to, could not serve any political ideology in a direct way. In a further critique of Schapiro’s “Nature of Abstract Art,” Davis explained: “Schapiro offers as proof of his relativistic thesis the fact that painters who use the same constructive [modernist] principles are not all good, and from this he argues that the constructive principle means nothing.” “But,” he continued, “the fact that the artists using the same methods are not all equal does not mean that the method does not have an objective value with relation to other methods.”⁸⁷⁵ For Davis, modernist forms demonstrated that good art, socially useful art, was not “merely an art which reflected the struggles of the workers,” nor did it have to be “in direct correspondence to a political program.”⁸⁷⁶ Interpreting Schapiro’s position to amount to a concession that modernism “[would be] alright under socialism but [could not] be afforded now,” Davis was unwavering in his belief that it was progressive: “It has affirmed the materiality of nature. It has repudiated the subject matter of official bourgeois art and has through struggle reaffirmed that the concern of painting is with the visual and spatial relation of the social objects which make up the real world of our experience.”⁸⁷⁷

⁸⁷³ Davis papers, 9 March 1938.

⁸⁷⁴ Schapiro, “Nature of Abstract Art,” *Marxist Quarterly* 1 (January-March 1937), pp. 78-97; reprinted in *Worldview in Painting*, pp. 185-211. Davis papers, 27 August 1937.

⁸⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 5 August 1938.

⁸⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 9 March 1938.

⁸⁷⁷ *Ibid.*; *Ibid.*, 27 August 1937.

I now want to return to *Swing Landscape* to argue in support of Davis's conviction that modernist forms could be used to create a social art that was aligned with the interests of a working-class audience. Indeed, one could convincingly posit that the ideal spectator for the Williamsburg mural was the unionized, left-leaning worker, one who now lived in a modern, racially and ethnically diverse community, provided for under the auspices of the New Deal. The crucial point here is that the mural does not merely *re-present* the piers of New York, as did Social Realist images such as the 1934 lithographs by Raphael Soyer and Nicolai Cikovsky, entitled *Waterfront* (fig. 112) and *East River* (fig. 113) respectively (this latter print appears to be the basis for the later oil painting *On the East River*); or Refregier's later (and highly controversial) murals for the Rincon Annex Post Office in San Francisco which, executed after the war under the auspices of the Section, pictured the *Maritime and General Strike* and included a panel entitled *Waterfront — 1934* (fig. 114).⁸⁷⁸ For Davis, such images merely reflected the struggles of waterfront workers back to them. He was adamant that such literal picturing was "complacent" and not adequate to the task of suggesting "new possibilities" and "the dynamism of contemporary life."⁸⁷⁹ Refusing the normative aspects of naturalist painting, he maintained that modernist forms constituted a "new realism" that enabled the artist to create an analogue of contemporary reality which, by shedding "new light and meaning on our experiences," was capable of developing a heightened understanding in its audience of their own conditions and interests.⁸⁸⁰

To claim that an art is realist is to make claims about reality itself and I also want to suggest that while Davis's theory of reality was materialist, with "materialism affirm[ing] the reality of events and thus giv[ing] them an importance that idealism cannot," *Swing Landscape* was both projective and utopian in its claims.⁸⁸¹ With its chromatic vibrancy, its cocatenation of differing motifs, its "democratic" treatment of form and space, and its nod towards swing music, the mural pointed towards cultural

⁸⁷⁸ On Refregier's murals and the controversy they generated see Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, pp. 201-204 and Lee, *Painting on the Left*, pp. 219-223.

⁸⁷⁹ Davis, "Abstract Painting Today," p. 124.

⁸⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 9 March 1938.

⁸⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 5 August 1938.

fusion and social integration. As such, the use of modernist forms did not constitute a retreat from political commitment, but a vehicle for expressing it. In his notes of June 1937 Davis expressly made the connection between “the method to be used by the modern artist in making a picture of contemporary value” and a “C.I.O. audience.”⁸⁸² It was clearly his objective that his work find a vital resonance with its working-class viewers and when the residents did receive their murals the Williamsburg Tenants’ Council wrote to Washington to protest against proposed limitations on WPA costs that would effectively entail the closing down of the FAP.⁸⁸³ Such cuts were, however, already underway, and within a year Davis would be terminated from the project.

Davis v. Greene

The Williamsburg project is also significant in that it serves as site where the differing views towards modernism and leftist politics espoused by Davis and Greene were held in tension. Although both artists regarded modernist innovations as inherently progressive, where Davis maintained that modernist forms were realist and grounded in the material world, Greene’s approach was more idealist. Moreover, while Davis staunchly supported the artist’s alliance with the working class, Greene maintained that the artist occupied a “specialist” role in society. The differences in their respective philosophies, and the ramifications of these differences for the modern artist, will become evident through a closer analysis of Greene’s practice.

Born in Millville, New York, Greene received a Bachelor’s degree in philosophy in 1926. He was also interested in the writings of Freud and, following a fellowship in psychology undertaken in Vienna, which he later transferred to Columbia University, he accepted a post teaching English literature at Dartmouth College.⁸⁸⁴ In 1931 he and his wife, the artist Gertrude Glass, moved to Paris, where Greene abandoned a writing career to pursue painting at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. Like Glass, he was

⁸⁸² *Ibid.*, 20 June 1937.

⁸⁸³ Tenants’ Council of Williamsburg to Hopkins, 20 May 1938, AAA; as cited in Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 176.

⁸⁸⁴ A fire swept through the studio that Greene shared with Swinden in 1940, destroying much of their work from the 1930s, and little in the way of archival material remains. By the 1940s Greene had given up abstraction for landscape painting; see *The Art of Balcomb Greene*; and Elaine de Kooning, “Greene Paints a Picture,” *Art News* 53.3 (May 1954), pp. 34-37; 48-50.

interested in abstract geometry and was influenced by Mondrian and the Abstraction-Création group.⁸⁸⁵ The couple returned to New York in 1932 and the following year helped to establish the Artists' Union. They were also founding members of the AAA in 1937, and Greene served as its first chairman, a position to which he was re-elected in 1939 and 1941.

The AAA was formed primarily as an exhibiting society. In 1938 the first of three yearbooks issued by the group stated the purpose of the organization: "To unite abstract artists living in the US, to bring before the public their individual works, and in every possible way foster public appreciation for this direction in painting and sculpture."⁸⁸⁶ The group further clarified its mandate as follows: "We believe that a new art form has been established which is definite enough in character to demand this united effort. This art is to be distinguished from those efforts characterized by expressionism, realistic representation, surrealism, etc."⁸⁸⁷ Although Greene was a leftist, the AAA's charter made no reference to radical politics and leftist critics perceived the group to be pursuing a reactionary form of idealism in their work. Their first exhibition at the Squibb Gallery in 1937 (fig. 115) received a particularly frosty reception from the Communist left.⁸⁸⁸ *New Masses* greeted their works as "the most extreme form of the bourgeois revival" whose "head-strong purists decry all traffic with the immediate world."⁸⁸⁹ Intent on pursuing "the dead end of subjective isolation," their abstractions were deemed to be a bunch of "intellectual mumbo-jumbo."⁸⁹⁰ The group fared no better on the occasion of their second annual exhibition

⁸⁸⁵ Founded in 1931, Abstraction-Création lasted until 1936 and gave its members a sense of solidarity by creating an international union for the exponents of geometric art. The group's main activity was the publication of an annual yearbook entitled "Abstraction-Création, Art non-figuratif." On the development of geometric abstraction see Magdalena Dabrowski, *Contrasts of Form: Geometric Abstract Art, 1910-1980* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1985); George Rickey, *Constructivism: Origins and Evolution*, rev. ed. (New York: George Braziller, 1995); or Willy Rotzler, *Constructivism and the Geometric Tradition* (Buffalo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1979). On Gertrude Greene see *Gertrude Greene: Constructions – Collages – Paintings* (New York: ACA Galleries, 1981).

⁸⁸⁶ [Preface to the 1938 edition], *American Abstract Artists*, p. 6.

⁸⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸⁸ Kainen, "American Abstract Artists," *AF* 3.3-4 (May 1937), pp. 25-26; for a slightly more positive take see von Wiegand, "The Fine Arts," *NM* 23 (20 April 1937), pp. 38-39.

⁸⁸⁹ O. Frank, "New Forces in American Art," *NM* 28.3 (July 1938), p. 24.

⁸⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

in 1938. Kainen, who maintained an unwavering commitment to modernism in his art writing, continued to find the work of the AAA “barely comprehensible.”⁸⁹¹

As chairman of the AAA Greene was instrumental in writing and editing the group’s public statements and charges from the left that their art was idealist were substantiated in his contributions. This is not, however, to say that Greene spoke for everyone in the group and some members took issue with his position on aesthetic matters. As leftist and fellow AAA member Harari later wrote, “I could not accept the idea that a formally pure art in and of itself denoted an evolutionary advance over an art of forms rooted in the natural world; to the contrary, I saw the former not leading forward, but, within its logic, veering toward a void.”⁸⁹² Harari was not alone in his unwillingness to sever the connections between abstract form and the exterior world and other members of the group also rejected Greene’s emphasis on non-objectivity in favour of a more realist approach. In October 1937, a few months after the AAA’s inaugural exhibition, Harari wrote a letter to *Art Front* on behalf of Browne, Herzl Emanuel, McNeil, Bengelsdorf Browne, Matulka, and Leo Lances. “It is our very definite belief,” he stated, “that abstract art forms are not separated from life, but on the contrary are great realities, manifestation of a search into the world about one’s self, having basis in living actuality, made by artists who walk the earth, who see colors (which are realities), squares (which are realities).”⁸⁹³ Furthermore, Harari suggested that few artists could afford to put aside “materialism” and claimed that the “positive identification with life” suggested by modernist forms had “brought a profound change in our environment and in our lives.”⁸⁹⁴ Pointedly arguing against Greene’s stance, Harari contended that “The abstract work of an artist who is not conscious of or is contemptuous of the world about him is different from the abstract work of an artist who identifies himself with life and seeks generative force from its

⁸⁹¹ Kainen, “Abstract Art Exhibit Barely Comprehensible,” *DW*, 25 February 1938.

⁸⁹² Harari, “WPA-AAA” as cited in Mecklenburg, *The Patricia and Philip Frost Collection*, p. 101; Harari’s handwritten reminiscences of his experiences on the WPA are housed in the curatorial files of the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

⁸⁹³ “To the Editors,” *AF* 3.7 (October 1937), pp. 21-22.

⁸⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

realities.”⁸⁹⁵ His conclusion, which demonstrates affinities with Davis’s position, was that the work of such “realist-abstractionists” had social resonance and could be “seen, enjoyed and used by the greatest number of people.”⁸⁹⁶

As Harari’s letter suggests, Davis and Gorky were not the only modernists to be effected by the example of Léger. Those members of the AAA who were styling themselves as “realists” were almost certainly responding to his lecture on “The New Realism” that he delivered while in New York at mid-decade.⁸⁹⁷ In fact, much about Greene’s aesthetic theory, which stood in stark contrast to this approach, can be gleaned from an exchange that occurred between him and Weinstock in the pages of *Art Front* a month after the magazine carried extracts of Léger’s lecture. Weinstock’s response was written from an uncompromisingly Marxist perspective and asserted that Léger’s art “continues an estrangement established between artist and society.”⁸⁹⁸ Adopting a position which, as Hemingway observes, was almost identical with that which Schapiro would enunciate in his “The Social Bases of Art” (a paper he delivered at the Artists’ Congress in February 1936), Weinstock argued that “the abuse of power on the part of capital extended from human needs to the highest forms of culture” and living in a society dominated by the commodity form left artists to peddle their wares and compete in usefulness “with refrigerators.”⁸⁹⁹ The ensuing experience of alienation subsequently led to the solipsism of the modern artist, who, as exemplified by Picasso and Joyce, established “closed circles” and became preoccupied with “mysteries and fetishes.”⁹⁰⁰ Thus, while Weinstock affirmed Léger’s contributions to modern art, his work nevertheless continued to “bare scars” of the supremacy of exchange value over use value.⁹⁰¹ Léger had not been able to extricate

⁸⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹⁷ For example, Bengtelsdorf Browne delivered a slide lecture at the Artists’ Union in September 1935 entitled “A Basic Approach to the New Realism in Art;” she also wrote an essay for an AAA publication entitled “The New Realism;” see *American Abstract Artists*, pp. 21-22. Significantly, Mondrian joined the AAA after his arrival in New York in 1940 and his last essay, which was written expressly for the AAA’s yearbook in 1946, was entitled “A New Realism,” pp. 225-235.

⁸⁹⁸ Weinstock [Humboldt], “Freedom in Painting,” *AF* 2.2 (January 1936), p. 10.

⁸⁹⁹ Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, p. 46; Weinstock, “Freedom in Painting,” p. 10.

⁹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

his painting from the dominance of the commodity, something which could only be accomplished “when the subject matter is itself free, that is, when objects need no longer be seen in relationships that in turn enslave the artist and us.”⁹⁰²

Where Weinstock found Léger’s art symptomatic of the limitations of bourgeois culture and wanted modern art to be more fully integrated with the goals of revolutionary society, Greene subscribed to a more elitist view, one which applied to his perspective on modernism in general. While he too called for revolution, with the current economic crisis offering the immediate motive for an uprising, he felt that the artist should occupy the role of a “specialist” who sought “new methods for stimulating man’s sensory self.”⁹⁰³ Drawing on his interest in Freud he claimed that the present social system, in which the artist suffered “constant fear even for outward security,” had created a “generation of neurotics whose sensations function ineptly and defensively.”⁹⁰⁴ According to Greene, “It has remained for the artist, as specialist, to make paintings whose function is to integrate individuals, by clarity and courage transforming them from defensive human beings.”⁹⁰⁵ Léger’s significance thus lay in his ability to abstract and simplify objects into a new integration whose purpose was “stimulating experience.”⁹⁰⁶ For Greene, who advocated a non-objective form of abstraction, the only shortcoming of Léger’s work was his overly “close reliance upon the literal object,” a reliance that was accompanied by the “temptation for trite analogies.”⁹⁰⁷ Greene admitted that a commitment to non-objectivity meant that such work “must often fall beyond the comprehension of most people;” but the true “pioneer” must not be impeded in their mission. Adopting an attitude entirely cognate with that presented in Greenberg’s 1939 article “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Greene suggested that artistic expression “understood without effort is fit only for sale to

⁹⁰² *Ibid.*

⁹⁰³ Greene, “The Functions of Léger,” *AF* 2.2 (January 1936), p. 8.

⁹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

⁹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Hollywood” and the artist must look for support from “a fearless intelligentsia.”⁹⁰⁸ He further clarified the “specialist” role of the artist in *Art Front* a few months later:

Without denying that [the artist’s] ultimate aim is to touch the crowd, he sees the futility of addressing it in the language commonly used by the crowd. He must employ his own language, in this instance the language of color and form, in order to move, dominate and direct the crowd, which is his special way of being understood.⁹⁰⁹

Encouraging the artist to rise above the fray, Greene’s ideas are indebted to those of Gleizes and Metzinger, who insisted that only the artist possessed a true “plastic consciousness” which s/he “forces” the crowd to adopt.⁹¹⁰ Interestingly, Léger had also called for “an artistic sensibility far in advance of the normal vision of the crowd,” but he was working at cross-purposes to Greene; for Léger (who, like Davis, would have preferred Hollywood over the intelligentsia any day), the “vision of the crowd” was equated with the “so-called men of . . . good taste” who failed to realize that by embracing modernist forms painting “has never been so truly realistic, so firmly attached to its own period.”⁹¹¹

Greene’s perspective on modernist practices was not consonant with the realist stance adopted by Léger and Davis. While they all maintained that modernist forms were suitable for a mass public art, this is where the similarities in their opinions ended. Taking direct aim at Davis’s approach, Greene contended that “no adequate abstract painting employs symbols” because “symbolism is the art of substitution.”⁹¹² Again making the case for a strictly *non-objective* modernism that disallowed any interpretive space for “trite analogies,” Greene insisted that form be derived “from memory and from the very ample store-house of the unconscious.”⁹¹³ If, like Davis, he believed that a modernist formal repertoire was radical in and of itself, in contradistinction to Davis he argued for some kind of autonomous aesthetic emotion

⁹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

⁹⁰⁹ Greene, “Abstract Art at the Modern Museum,” *AF* 2.5 (April 1936), p. 8.

⁹¹⁰ Gleizes and Metzinger, “Cubism,” p. 11. I am grateful to Hemingway for pointing out the parallels between these statements.

⁹¹¹ Léger, “Contemporary Achievements in Painting,” p. 12.

⁹¹² Greene, “Question and Answer,” *AF* 20 (February 1937), p. 10.

⁹¹³ *Ibid.*; “The Function of Léger,” p. 9.

that was distinct from other cultural and political concerns and was instead grounded in the unconscious. As Greene wrote in "Expression as Production," an essay published in the 1938 AAA Yearbook:

The abstract artist can approach man through the most immediate of aesthetic experiences, touching below consciousness and the veneer of attitudes, contacting the whole ego rather than the ego on the defensive.

There is nothing in his amorphous and geometric form, and nothing within the consciousness or within memory from which he improvises, which is deceptive. The experience is under its own auspices.⁹¹⁴

Greene was thus arguing for an approach to abstraction that existed at a considerable remove from Davis's insistence on an art grounded in *everyday* consciousness. While Greene felt that modernist form had a progressive function, it was certainly not that of political agitation and he admonished artists to steer clear of "spurious political machines which can only misuse him."⁹¹⁵ Again in contradistinction to Davis, who was firm that "the artist must work organizationally for those changes in the economic order which would bring about a democratic culture," Greene warned that while an artist "may join a union, function on committees, [and] picket the strongholds of reactionism," a line existed between "these manoeuvres and his canvas . . . [and] any artist who ventures from his studio drags his Muse with him by her neck."⁹¹⁶

Moreover, while Greene consistently associated modern art with revolution in his *Art Front* writings, insisting that "no revolt against tradition has been more incisive than the 'abstract movement,'" he expressly distanced himself from the CPUSA on artistic matters arguing that it had "only aborted a reactionary art, mouthing the fine phrases of revolution for an instant, then taking a quick dive into the much publicized Midwestern grave which Benton and Curry have dug for — in a word, into nationalism, without benefit of music."⁹¹⁷ Further attesting to his disillusionment with the Party, he implied that Communism was no better than fascism and was merely "a

⁹¹⁴ Greene, "Expression as Production," *American Abstract Artists*, n. p.

⁹¹⁵ Greene, "Society and the Modern Artist," *Art for the Millions*, p. 263.

⁹¹⁶ Davis papers, 9 March 1938; Greene, "Society and the Modern Artist," p. 263.

⁹¹⁷ Greene, "The Function of Léger," p. 8; "Society and the Modern Artist," p. 264.

would-be totalitarian movement which operates within a democracy.”⁹¹⁸ While Davis would have agreed with Greene’s evaluation vis-a-vis artistic matters, he reproached him for “deny[ing] the leadership of the Communist Party in the field of politics” and labelled him a Trotskyist.⁹¹⁹ Further characterizing Greene as an “idealist,” he censured him for accepting such a narrow audience for his art, and for refusing “to make any organizational effort toward enlarging that audience through the United Front.”⁹²⁰

As is evident, during the 1930s there was far less critical consensus around modernist practices than previous literature suggests. Artist’s differing relationships with modernism and their varying stances with respect to the left were considerably more nuanced and complex than postwar histories allow. With regard to Williamsburg, documentary evidence substantiates that at least six murals — those by Bolotowsky, Criss, Davis, Greene, Kelpé and Swinden — were completed and at least four (those by Bolotowsky, Greene, Swinden, and Kelpé) were actually installed. Although Bowden, Browne, de Kooning, Matulka, and McNeil had been hired for the project and were represented with sketches in *New Horizons*, none of their murals seem to have been realized. Following a long hiatus during which the murals by Bolotowsky, Greene, Kelpé, and Swinden were thought to have been lost or destroyed, they were recovered by the New York City Housing Authority, which had them restored and transferred to the Brooklyn Museum in 1990, where they remain on long-term loan.⁹²¹

The murals by Davis and Criss were never installed at Williamsburg, but they have been preserved. In 1938 Davis recorded in his diary that *Swing Landscape* was picked up and taken to the Federal Art Gallery on 57th Street, where it was shown in the *Murals for the Community* exhibition. In his review of the exhibition Jewell was less than flattering and anything but objective (one might argue) given his previous exchange with Davis over the value of the FAP occasioned by *New Horizons* in 1936.

⁹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁹¹⁹ Davis papers, 9 March 1938.

⁹²⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹²¹ Documentation for the murals, including correspondence concerning their reclamation, is held in the NYCHAC; see also Gallati, *The Williamsburg Murals*.

Although all the Williamsburg murals left Jewell “unimpressed,” and even Gorky’s panels for Newark gave him “a half uneasy feeling,” Davis’s work was the target of his fieriest denunciations.⁹²² According to Jewell, *Swing Landscape* “makes the easel scream;” he continued, “this non-objective inebriant cancels everything else within range . . . [and] deserves a room of its own, or an entire housing project.”⁹²³ However, in his overview of the modernist work created under the project Jewell was at least willing to concede that it was not entirely without merit, especially when it took the form of a mural: “Abstract design, indeed, though not equipped to prod us into social consciousness or agitate against war, may yet seem frequently more sociable, more at peace with itself and its environment, when filling a wall than when bounded by a frame.”⁹²⁴

Swing Landscape was next was exhibited in a duo show of works by Davis and Hartley organized by Peggy Frank for the Cincinnati Modern Art Society in 1941.⁹²⁵ Henry Hope, the fledgling director of the Indiana University Art Museum in Bloomington, organized for the mural to be allocated to the museum’s collection, and it was accessioned in 1942. For such an ardent champion of public art as Davis, the fact that his mural was never installed in the social room at Williamsburg and instead ended up mounted on the wall of a museum would have served as a massive betrayal of New Deal ideals. Meeting a similar fate, Criss’s *Sixth Avenue El* (1938) is now part of the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

Toward the end of the decade the WPA projects became a prime focus for conservative opposition to the Roosevelt administration. The arts projects in particular came to symbolize the most widespread and wasteful “boondoggling” undertaken by New Deal, as well as a haven for “un-American” activities. Although events within the broader political field did not bode well for the future of federal patronage, the FAP

⁹²² Jewell, “Commentary on Murals: Exhibition at the Federal Art Gallery Presents WPA New York Region Survey,” *NYT*, 29 May 1938. A copy of the pamphlet accompanying the *Murals for the Community* exhibition is available in NARA, RG 69.

⁹²³ *Ibid.*

⁹²⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹²⁵ The catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Marsden Hartley, Stuart Davis* (Cincinnati: Modern Art Society, 1941) included essays by Peggy Frank and Davis.

did, however, still have a few years of life left in it and several more modernist murals were created under its aegis, most significantly those for the New York World's Fair in 1939.⁹²⁶ It was on this occasion that the practices and ideology of the New Deal were showcased not only to Americans, but to the world. It was also within the context of the Fair that abiding cultural concerns with a "usable past" were supplanted by a preoccupation with (in O'Connor's apt phrase) a "usable future," a preoccupation that would in many ways determine the positioning of modernism within American culture for years to come.⁹²⁷

⁹²⁶ There were additional commissions for modernist murals on Welfare Island (now Roosevelt Island). For example, Bengelsdorf Browne painted a mural in 1938 for the Central Nurses Home; the building was subsequently demolished and with it, one assumes, the mural. The Chronic Disease Hospital (now Goldwater Hospital) also commissioned a group of modernist murals in 1941 by Bolotowsky, Swinden, Joseph Rugolo, and Dane Chanase, as well as a photo-mural by Browne. Bolotowsky's mural, which was installed in a circular room that served as the lounge for male patients, remains in situ and has recently undergone restoration. All of the murals for the Hospital received final approval from the New York City Art Commission between April and July 1942, making them among the last murals ever completed under the FAP. As these murals are characterized by a familiar fusion of biomorphic and geometric elements and do not contribute anything further to my argument, either in formal or theoretical terms, I will not deal with them here. See Berman, *The Lost Years*, pp. 151-153 and "Abstractions for Public Spaces," p. 85; the majority of the murals are illustrated in these two texts.

⁹²⁷ O'Connor, "The Usable Future: The Role of Fantasy in the Promotion of a Consumer Society for Art," in Helen Harrison, ed., *Dawn of a New Day: The New York World's Fair, 1939-1940*, (New York: Queens Museum and New York University Press, 1980), pp. 57-71.

Chapter Seven

“Tomorrow, Inc.”⁹²⁸: Modernism, Murals, and the Construction of a “Usable Future” at the 1939/1940 New York World’s Fair

War in Europe seemed certain when the New York World’s Fair opened in April 1939 (figs 116 and 117).⁹²⁹ Dedicated to the theme “Building the World of Tomorrow,” this exposition would not focus on celebrating previous achievements, but would instead cast aside preoccupations with a “usable past” for fantasies of a planned future. Indeed, as historian Robert Rydell suggests, since their inception in the nineteenth century such expositions were intended to serve as “cultural icons for a nation’s hopes” and to act as “structuring metaphors” for its citizens.⁹³⁰ Often reflecting profound concerns about the future while deflecting criticisms of the established order, these events were a proven means for lending legitimacy to a variety of economic, political, and ideological constructs.⁹³¹ The 1939 Fair opened its gates after a decade of insecurity and instability and was thus designed to restore popular faith in the vitality of the nation’s economic and political systems. More specifically, it was the intention of the exposition’s planners to bolster confidence in the ability of government, business, and scientific and intellectual leaders to guide the country out of the Depression toward a new promised land of material abundance.⁹³²

To suggest that the Fair exerted an important influence on the way many Americans thought about themselves and the world in which they lived probably understates the

⁹²⁸ This phrase was (rather presciently and all-too appropriately) used by Jewell in an article on the Fair; see *Parnassus* 9.5 (October 1937), p. 7.

⁹²⁹ Literature on the New York World’s Fair is vast. Among the best starting points for understanding its cultural and political significance are Harrison, *Dawn of a New Day*; Robert Rydell, John Findling, and Kimberly Pelle, *Fair America: World’s Fairs in the US* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2000), pp. 72-99; Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century of Progress Expositions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 115-156; Joseph Cusker, “The World of Tomorrow: The 1939 New York World’s Fair,” PhD thesis, Rutgers University, 1990; Stern, et al., *New York 1930*, pp. 727-755; Alice Goldfarb Marquis, *Hopes and Ashes: The Birth of Modern Times, 1929-1939* (London: Collier Macmillan, 1986); Folke Kihlstedt, “Utopia Realized: The World’s Fairs of the 1930s” in Joseph Corn, ed., *Imagining Tomorrow* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), pp. 97-118; and Susman, *Culture as History*, pp. 211-229.

⁹³⁰ Rydell, *World of Fairs*, pp. 1; 3.

⁹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁹³² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

importance of the exposition.⁹³³ As has been noted both at the time and in subsequent studies of the event, the unparalleled promotional campaign pursued by Fair officials ensured that the “exposition’s composite message reache[d] millions who never actually enter[ed] its gates.”⁹³⁴ For example, while attendance figures fell far short of the anticipated fifty million visitors, the exposition generated some 236 newsreels that reached an estimated 220 million people.⁹³⁵ However, while I do not want to underestimate the cultural and ideological significance of such events, I do want to underscore the importance of human agency in assessing the Fair’s constellation of explicit and implicit ambitions. For if cultural theorists such as Tony Bennett interpret international expositions such as this as examples of an “intersecting set of institutional and disciplinary relations which might be productively analyzed as particular articulations of power and knowledge” — what Bennett terms “the exhibitionary complex” — I want to temper his Foucauldian reading of these events by emphasizing that as blueprints for the future they were conditional constructs and were necessarily subject to popular acceptance of the strategies proposed by exposition planners.⁹³⁶

So while, as Bennett argues, such expositions are always imbricated within a network of knowledge and power relations and may be implicated in the production and dissemination of a series of discourses around nationalism, democracy, consumer capitalism, etc., I also want to stress the potential for multi-accentual readings of these discursive formations and the production of oppositional or resistant meanings beyond those sanctioned by the Fair’s ideologues. Such expositions were, as Rydell puts it, “theaters of power,” but they were also what cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls “webs of signification,” and in their aim of “endowing reality with meaning,”

⁹³³ For a discussion of such influence on the part of World’s Fairs in the US more generally see Rydell, et al., *Fair America*, pp. 1-13.

⁹³⁴ Gardner Ainsworth, “The New York Fair: Adventure in Promotion,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* (October 1939), pp. 694-695.

⁹³⁵ Harrison, *Dawn of a New Day*, p. 1; Rydell, *World of Fairs*, p. 1.

⁹³⁶ Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 59.

such meaning remained opened to a variety of conflicting interpretations.⁹³⁷

From its inception in the spring of 1935, through its planning and development, to its opening on the eve of the Second World War, the Fair was a vast and multifaceted undertaking. Much of its political and ideological import stems from self-conscious efforts on the part of planners to design and present a coherent model of American society, not only to its own citizens, but also to the international community. The conversion of the fields of Flushing Meadow in northern Queens from what F. Scott Fitzgerald memorably described in *The Great Gatsby* (1922) as a “valley of ashes” into a great urban recreational centre occurred during a particularly turbulent period in American history. As such, the ways in which modernism was positioned on this occasion merits analysis, both for what it implied about the ways in which cultural forms were understood within the context of the Fair itself and — given the shaping potential of such expositions — for what it suggested about the future. In order to do this, this chapter will explore the ways in which modernism was deployed both within the exposition generally and, more specifically, in the accompanying exhibition *Art in Our Time*, mounted by the Museum of Modern Art and expressly planned for visitors to the Fair.⁹³⁸ As Terry Smith claims, the combined influence of the Fair and the museum on the exhibiting, marketing and interpreting of modernism was “great at the time, and was seminal, for it persists.”⁹³⁹ The central questions to be addressed here are what effects did they have on discourses surrounding modernism at the end of the decade? What were the contradictions surrounding and informing these discourses? Where did modernism fit into the World of Tomorrow? And, perhaps more importantly, why was this role to be divorced from the priorities pursued during the New Deal era?

⁹³⁷ Rydell, *World of Fairs*, p. 11; Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p. 182.

⁹³⁸ Unlike the large corpus of literature on the role of industrial design at the Fair, remarkably little scholarly attention has been given to art. The best sources are Harrison, *Dawn of a New Day* and Terry Smith’s “Funfair Futurama: A Consuming Spectacle,” *Making the Modern*, pp. 405–421.

⁹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

The Business of Tomorrow

The Fair's origins were rooted in the New York business and financial community, which adopted the idea of sponsoring an exposition as a means of alleviating economic distress in the metropolitan area, while simultaneously working to renew public support for their interests. As contemporary commentators noted, leaders of business and industry were as interested as state administrators and policy makers in addressing the lack of confidence in capitalist democracy and in positioning the US as a bulwark against totalitarian and fascist incursions on political and economic freedoms.⁹⁴⁰ With the largest stake in the exposition corporate sponsors were particularly keen to resurrect popular support for "free" private enterprise and to demonstrate how they provided "invaluable services" to the consuming public, thereby embracing the exposition as what Frank Monaghan, Director of Research for the Fair, described as "probably the greatest and most ambitious promotional project ever attempted."⁹⁴¹

The Fair was put under the direction of Grover Whalen, a former New York Police Commissioner and president of Shenley Distilleries. According to his statement in a promotional volume of 1936, the Fair was intended to predict, and possibly dictate, the "the shape of things to come."⁹⁴² It would do so, according to Whalen, by exhibiting "the most promising developments of ideas, products, services and social factors of the present day."⁹⁴³ These developments would be presented in such a fashion that "the visitor may, in the midst of a rich and colorful festival, gain a vision of what he might attain for himself and for his community by intelligent cooperative planning toward the better life of the future."⁹⁴⁴ The following year he spelled out the commercial focus of the event more clearly in a public relations pamphlet where he explained that the Fair was seen as a means of bringing "large groups of producers and distributors . . .

⁹⁴⁰ See, for example, Ainsworth, "The New York Fair" and "Business Backs the New York World's Fair to Meet the New Deal Propaganda," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 2.320 (April 1938).

⁹⁴¹ Ainsworth, "The New York Fair," pp. 694; 697.

⁹⁴² Grover Whalen, *New York World's Fair 1939* (New York: New York World's Fair, 1936) n. p.

⁹⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

into direct, planned and simultaneous contact with the great masses of consumers.”⁹⁴⁵ Not nearly as visionary as before, Whalen now claimed that “business and industry possess *today* most of the implements and materials necessary to fabricate a new World of Tomorrow.”⁹⁴⁶

Planning for the exposition was led by two other influential members of the business community: George McAnenny, president of the Title Guarantee and Trust Company and head of the Regional Planning Association and Percy Straus, Macy’s head executive.⁹⁴⁷ Once the theme of the Fair had been established industrial designers were brought in to realize the planners’s vision. The designers included prominent figures in the profession such as Henry Dreyfuss, who was responsible for the keynote exhibit “Democracity” (fig. 118), a futuristic city that fully expressed the Fair authorities’s preoccupation with planning and order, along with Norman Bel Geddes, who designed the General Motors corporate exhibit, replete with the widely popular “Futurama” (fig. 119), another exercise in urban planning featuring a large diorama of a fully modernized American city in 1960.⁹⁴⁸ It was, however, Walter Dorwin Teague and Robert Kohn who were directly responsible for translating the theme of the exposition into the “Fair of the Future.” Teague served on the Fair’s Board of Design and its Theme Committee, and also received commissions from exhibitors such as Ford and US Steel; Kohn was past president of the American Institute of Architects and was a founding member of the Regional Planning Association of America. Teague’s experience designing two previous Depression-era expositions — the Chicago World’s Fair in 1933 and the Dallas Centennial Exhibition in 1936 — played an important role in the development of the New York event and it was he who early on

⁹⁴⁵ Whalen, “What the Fair Means to Business and Industry,” *New York World’s Fair Bulletin* 1 (June 1937), p. 1.

⁹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴⁷ In September 1935 Whalen, McAnenny, and Straus incorporated the Fair in collaboration with the heads of twenty-three banking and trust companies; thirty corporations; fifteen Wall Street law firms; eight insurance companies and retail firms; and eight business associations; see Cusker, “The World of Tomorrow,” *Dawn of a New Day*, p. 3.

⁹⁴⁸ On industrial design during this period see Jeffrey Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited: Industrial Design in America, 1925-1939* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979). For more on Bel Geddes see Roland Marchand, “The Designers Go the Fair, II” in Dennis Doordan, ed., *Design History: An Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 103-144.

defined the role of the industrial designer in the “World of Tomorrow” as “the interpreter of industry to the public.”⁹⁴⁹ According to Teague, the Fair was particularly significant in that it provided business and industry with “an opportunity to state the case for the democratic system of individual enterprise” at a time when other nations were adopting collectivism.⁹⁵⁰ However, given the depth of the domestic economic crisis, one of the key issues facing planners and designers alike was how to address calls for widespread reform while preserving democratic principles in the face of the rising challenges posed by fascism and Communism. As became evident in the final realization of the Fair, planners sought to manifest a direct link between the material well-being of society and the strength of democratic institutions.

A Fair Deal?

In a climate of mounting political instability the Fair also provided an important opportunity for the New Deal administration to promote and defend its vision of the future. The question is what exactly was that vision? Roosevelt was a charismatic leader who was particularly savvy when it came to public relations and he, like the Fair’s planners, understood the power of expositions to frame public opinion. Surpassed only by his trademark radio addresses in its ability to reach a mass audience, the Fair served as a forum in which to popularize specific New Deal programmes, while providing a context for reinforcing the legitimacy and durability of the nation’s political and economic institutions, both sorely tested by the exigencies of the Depression.⁹⁵¹ Central to New Deal forecasts for the future were assurances of economic recovery and political stability. The seemingly intractable issue was how this was to be achieved.

⁹⁴⁹ Walter Dorwin Teague, “Building the World of Tomorrow: The New York World’s Fair,” *Art and Industry* 26 (April 1939), p. 134. Teague discusses his ideas and approach in *Design This Day: The Technique of Order in the Machine Age* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1940), which he published before the Fair closed. See also Marchand, “The Designers go the Fair, I,” *Design History*, pp. 89-102.

⁹⁵⁰ Teague, “Building the World of Tomorrow,” p. 127.

⁹⁵¹ Roosevelt’s own role in planning such events dated back to the 1915 San Francisco exposition when he served as the head of the US government’s national exposition commission. See Rydell, *World of Fairs*, p. 118.

Since Roosevelt's election in 1932 an emphasis on planning had been a central tenet of New Deal rhetoric and was espoused by liberals and progressives alike.⁹⁵² Given the general economic disarray of the capitalist West, New Dealers such as Rexford Tugwell and Henry Wallace argued that a strong federal presence was needed to plan the economy to control the excesses of business, eliminate waste, and ensure the adequate provision of consumer demand.⁹⁵³ However, as Alan Brinkley notes, political ideas were constantly interacting with, and adapting to, larger changes in the social, economic, and cultural landscape, and by the time the Fair opened its gates it had already become apparent that planning and state intervention as the New Deal conceived them were not adequate to the task of effectively dealing with the problems of modern capitalism.⁹⁵⁴ Just as the administration thought it had "licked the Great Depression" a combination of political and economic factors served to significantly undermine its confidence.⁹⁵⁵ Roosevelt's ill-advised plan for "packing" the Supreme Court, first proposed after his second inauguration, prompted a revolt among conservative members of the Democratic Party and both his congressional strength and popular appeal were eroded as a result.

An even greater blow was dealt to the administration's fortunes with the unanticipated recession that began in October 1937, an economic collapse that was, in Brinkley's words, "more rapid and in some ways more severe than the crash of 1929."⁹⁵⁶ Responding to congressional pressure and keen to achieve a balanced budget, the President reduced relief spending for the fiscal year 1936-1937 and in the spring of 1937 he further agreed to a series of substantial cuts to federal spending. But the sudden withdrawal of hundreds of millions of dollars in relief funds and the closing of

⁹⁵² On the role of planning in the New Deal administration, including early statements by Roosevelt and Tugwell, see "Part Three: National Economic Planning" in Zinn, ed., *New Deal Thought*, pp. 77-108.

⁹⁵³ Addressing Tugwell and Wallace as exemplars, Hemingway offers a trenchant assessment of the issues of state intervention and planning with specific reference to the arts projects in "Cultural Democracy by Default," pp. 272-274. As Hemingway points out, faith in state intervention and planning was epitomized in Tugwell's *The Battle for Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935).

⁹⁵⁴ Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 4.

⁹⁵⁵ Brinkley, "The New Deal and the Idea of the State," p. 95.

⁹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 87; see also pp. 95-96.

thousands of projects all over the country catapulted the nation into a deeper recession. More was to follow. Conservatives in Congress were given a considerable boost in the November 1938 mid-term elections and the public began to display a growing antipathy toward the more aggressive features of the New Deal combined with a corresponding acceptance of the role of big business. Furthermore, liberals who had once admired the collective character of some European governments now looked with horror at the totalitarian states under fascism and Stalinism and saw in them a warning about what an excessively powerful government could become.

Taken together, these factors called into question the very legitimacy of the administration itself, provoking what Gary Gerstle and Steve Fraser describe as “a far-reaching reevaluation of the political project that New Deal policy makers had so confidently undertaken.”⁹⁵⁷ Finding itself in a state of “ideological and political disarray,” the combined pressures of the economic crisis and a resurgent right forced New Dealers not only to readjust their goals and priorities, but to “articulate and defend their ideological vision” — no easy task for an administration whose commitment to “bold, persistent experimentation” moved “in every direction at once.”⁹⁵⁸ This pressure, Brinkley contends, yielded two quite distinct formulations on the part New Deal liberals. The first called on the state to assume a permanent “regulatory” role to guard against the instability of the market; the second, which would prove more influential in the postwar era, envisaged a “compensatory” state that did not seek to control the mechanisms of capitalism as such, but whose role was to stimulate economic growth through the use of its fiscal powers.⁹⁵⁹ As the “regulatory” role of the early New Deal gave way to the “compensatory” role of the 1940s (what would soon be known as Keynesian economics), federal fiscal policy

⁹⁵⁷ Fraser and Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall*, p. xiii.

⁹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. xiii; xiv. Brinkley, “The New Deal and the Idea of the State,” p. 86. Roosevelt used the phrase “bold, persistent experimentation” while campaigning in May 1932; see Zinn, ed., *New Deal Thought*, pp. 77-84. Benjamin Solberg and Warren Jay Vinton castigated the administration in 1935 as one that “moves in every direction at once” in the context of their critique of Roosevelt for failing to formulate a coherent economic policy; see *ibid.*, pp. 385-392.

⁹⁵⁹ I borrow these terms from Brinkley. As he goes on to demonstrate, the history of the late New Deal, from the troubled years after the second economic collapse in 1937 through the conclusion of the war, is the story of a slow repudiation of the “regulatory” role in favour of an increasing shift toward a “compensatory one;” see Brinkley, “The New Deal and the Idea of the State,” pp. 94-98.

would no longer be geared towards contributing directly to production and economic development but, instead, to promoting mass consumption as a means of stimulating growth and maintaining a healthy economy.⁹⁶⁰ As economist Alvin Hansen was arguing in the late 1930s, the best way to ensure a prosperous future was “to work toward a higher consumption economy” and make consumer demand the force driving for production and investment instead of the other way around.⁹⁶¹ “Consumption,” he argued, “is the frontier of the future.”⁹⁶² Consumption, we know, would play a pivotal role in the World of Tomorrow and the Fair did much to promote the new consumer-driven commercial sectors.

As the Fair was to amply demonstrate, the World of Tomorrow was “a world in which both the idea and the reality of mass consumption were becoming central to American culture and to the American economy, gradually supplanting production as the principal focus of popular hopes and commitment.”⁹⁶³ As early as 1932 Roosevelt was presciently asserting that “in the future we are going to think less about the producer and more about the consumer,” and the Fair provided a particularly prominent opportunity to underscore the advantages that would accrue to the nation from *cooperation* between big business and the government.⁹⁶⁴ The emphasis on promoting this new consumer-driven sector tallies rather well with Michael Bernstein’s re-assessment of the factors that had led to economic collapse in the first place. Although it would only be the war that finally enabled the US to fully emerge from its financial crisis, the compensatory approach effectively addressed some of the larger issues around why the economy had been dragging for almost a decade and continued to be characterized by sluggish growth and high unemployment. Earlier liberal diagnoses interpreted the Depression as the inevitable result of an epochal shift tied to the notion of Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis” (which remained a staple of historical exegesis in the 1930s) and the concept of the “mature economy” (a theory which

⁹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁹⁶¹ Hansen as cited in *ibid.*, p. 98.

⁹⁶² *Ibid.* See also Hansen, “The Need for Long-Range Public Investment,” *New Deal Thought*, pp. 186-193.

⁹⁶³ Brinkley, *The End of Reform*, p. 4.

⁹⁶⁴ Roosevelt, “Bold, Persistent Experimentation,” *New Deal Thought*, p. 82.

Hansen subscribed to and which suggested that the great age of industrial growth was finally over and that economic expansion was not limitless).⁹⁶⁵

Bernstein, however, argues that the crash hinged upon the unique coincidence of a cyclic downturn with a fundamental secular transition from old sectors such as primary metals, textiles, and lumber (which still accounted for large shares of national output and employment) to new service sectors.⁹⁶⁶ According to Bernstein, in terms of both investment and employment the cumulative size of these new sectors (which included mass retailing, food processing, the manufacture of household appliances, medical care, and recreation) was simply not developed enough in the 1930s to catalyze an overall recovery.⁹⁶⁷ Given that this shift in the American economy was inescapable and irreversible it only made sense for the government to support the development of these new sectors by, among other measures, stimulating consumption and thereby promoting economic growth. As a result, if on the one hand the Fair was conceived as a demonstration of the triumph of enlightened social, economic, and technological engineering, on the other it was what Helen Harrison describes as a “monument to merchandising.”⁹⁶⁸ For if in the throes of the Depression planners sought to foreground the ways in which benevolent social guidance and planning would result in a peaceful and prosperous future, by the time the first visitors set foot onto Flushing Meadow that message was superseded by the more immediate marketing aims of American industry.⁹⁶⁹

⁹⁶⁵ On the “frontier thesis” see Susman, *Culture as History*, pp. 27-38.

⁹⁶⁶ Michael Bernstein, “Why the Great Depression Was Great,” *The Rise and Fall*, pp. 34-35. On “cultural lag” see, for example, Soule, *A Planned Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1932) and Chase, *A New Deal* (New York: Macmillan, 1932). New Dealers such as Tugwell and Wallace were also working under the assumption that the Depression marked an epochal shift requiring the cultivation of “new frontiers;” see, Tugwell, *The Battle for Democracy* and Wallace, *New Frontiers* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1934). For a discussion of “cultural lag” and its relations to the “frontier” see Pells, *Radical Visions*, p. 75. On the “mature economy” idea see Theodore Rosenof, *Patterns of Political Economy in America: The Failure to Develop a Democratic Left Synthesis, 1933-1950* (New York: Garland, 1983), pp. 39-46.

⁹⁶⁷ Bernstein, “Why the Great Depression Was Great,” p. 35.

⁹⁶⁸ Harrison, *Dawn of a New Day*, p. 1.

⁹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

The President's support for corporate designs on America's future was manifest in a number of ways. First, and most obviously, had he wanted to challenge the interests of the Fair's corporate sponsors he could have simply refused to endorse the participation of the federal government in the event. As Rydell points out, such a refusal would have had several immediate effects, including making it impossible for planners to secure the official participation of foreign governments and saving millions of dollars in federal funds that were required for constructing US federal buildings and installing displays, a significant expenditure in the context of the Depression (despite forecasts to the contrary, the Fair ended up with an official deficit of nearly \$19 million).⁹⁷⁰ However, far from distancing his administration from their vision of the World of Tomorrow, he not only delivered a rousing public address at the opening day ceremonies (fig. 120), but was explicit about his support in an enthusiastic telegram to the sponsors:

At this great Fair all the world may review what the US has achieved in the 150 years since George Washington was first inaugurated as President of the US; here millions of citizens may visualize the national life which is to come. That it will be a memorable and historic Fair, that it will profoundly influence our national life for many years to come, and that success may attend every phase of its activities — these are the hopes of the people of the US. All power to your sponsors.⁹⁷¹

In helping America to “visualize the life which is to come” the Fair served as a welcome forum for showcasing the New Deal and highlighting its accomplishments. As Theodore Hayes, executive assistant to the US commissioner to the Fair, had realized from the outset: “I saw in the Fair a precious opportunity to revitalize, to new heights, the fundamental faith in America of millions of Americans by selling and reselling the achievements of Government.”⁹⁷²

⁹⁷⁰ Rydell, *World of Fairs*, pp. 146-147; Harrison, *Dawn of a New Day*, p. 1.

⁹⁷¹ Roosevelt, telegram [November 1936?], cited in Rydell, *World of Fairs*, pp. 149-150.

⁹⁷² Theodore Hayes as cited in *ibid.*, p. 152.

The Future of Modernism

That modernist forms were also embraced on the occasion of the Fair was immediately and unmistakably evident in the exposition's Theme Center, whose monumental Trylon and Perisphere were wrapped in a mantle of white concrete (fig. 121). The Theme Center, which had been the touchstone of the planners's vision from the outset, was architecturally, visually, and symbolically at the centre of the exposition. It dominated every vista and was intended to sum up all of the interrelated elements of the Fair's theme. In keeping with contemporary canons of industrial design, both the Trylon and Perisphere were pure forms devoid of unnecessary adornments, as well as functional structures designed to serve as exhibition spaces. The surrounding 100 major exhibit buildings manifested various hybrid concatenations of Art Deco streamlining and the minimal white-box aesthetics of the International Style, giving the public its first, concentrated experiences of the modernity it was the Fair's purpose to market. However, as the architecture alone evinced, this was not to serve as the site for the promotion of a type of modernism associated with functionalism or the Welfare State, as had been the case in certain European countries; instead, this was the "sensational" modernism of corporate capital, with one critic disparagingly dubbing it the "Corporation Style" due to the "licentious liason" between modernism and "big business" for the "blatant purpose of advertising and sales."⁹⁷³ So where did art fit into the World of Tomorrow?

The Art of the Fair

As national director of the FAP and a staunch support of a Deweyan democratization of culture, Cahill insisted that contemporary American art was "an integral part" of the "great cooperative demonstration of the creative and productive forces of modern civilization which is the New York World's Fair."⁹⁷⁴ Just as the exposition provided an opportunity for architects and designers to showcase their talents, so too did it

⁹⁷³ Frederick Gutheim, "Buildings at the Fair," *MA* 32 (May 1939), pp. 286-289; 316-317. On the architecture see Eugene Santomasso, "The Design of Reason," *Dawn of a New Day*, pp. 29-41. For a review of the architecture from a leftist perspective see E. R. "Fair Enough: Architecture of 'World of Tomorrow' Takes Sensational Forms," *NM* 31 (11 April 1939), p. 31.

⁹⁷⁴ Cahill, "American Art Today," *American Art Today: New York World's Fair* (New York: National Art Society, 1939); extracts reprinted in *Parnassus* 11.5 (May 1939), pp. 14-15; 35-37 (all quotations will be taken from the former source).

become patron to a broad spectrum of American artists and their works. Largely because of the public nature of the displays, muralism, which could be easily integrated with the architecture, was singled-out as a particularly appropriate artform, and one that had gained considerable prominence by the end of the 1930s. Given Cahill's commitment to fostering a greater integration of art in society, it is unsurprising that, under his directorship, it was the FAP that had served as "the most powerful single agency in the rebirth of popular interest in the mural."⁹⁷⁵ By December 1938 the New York Mural Division alone was responsible for the completion of seventy-seven murals, with another fifty-six in progress, and the project sponsored some fourteen murals for the Fair.

The relatively small number of project murals commissioned for the Fair was the result of a range of factors. Firstly, the FAP was dedicated to executing murals for public spaces that were not within the jurisdiction of private industry; secondly, works of art executed under the aegis of the project were accompanied by the proviso that they be permanently allocated to public buildings (unrealized plans were floated to ultimately place the murals in state capitols when the Fair closed).⁹⁷⁶ However, surely the most significant limitation on the project's ability to commission murals was its impermanence. As McMahon was well-aware, the FAP was plagued by fluctuations in funding and, as she commented in 1937, procedure for allocating murals was complicated primarily by the temporary nature of the WPA, making it "hazardous for the World's Fair officials to enter into long-range negotiations with us."⁹⁷⁷

Permanency, however, was never Roosevelt's intention. The President saw the WPA as a temporary relief measure and he was keen to achieve a balanced budget.⁹⁷⁸ Thus, even in the early stages of Fair planning, the FAP operated tentatively and under

⁹⁷⁵ McCausland, "Preview: World's Fair Murals and Sculptures," *Parnassus* 10.7 (December 1938), p. 8. See also her "Living American Art," *Parnassus* 11.5 (May 1939), pp. 16-25.

⁹⁷⁶ McCausland, "Preview," p. 8.

⁹⁷⁷ McMahon as cited in Jewell, "Tomorrow, Inc.," p. 7. This article includes a detailed statement by McMahon on the Fair which she furnished at Jewell's request.

⁹⁷⁸ See Brinkley, "The New Deal and the Idea of the State," p. 95.

constant threat of layoffs.⁹⁷⁹ This instability was further exacerbated in 1937 when “the much vaunted ‘New Deal recovery’ suddenly gave way to the ‘Roosevelt recession.’”⁹⁸⁰ Attempts to reduce the level of state interventionism in the economic sphere had immediate ramifications in the cultural sphere. In an effort to sustain the art project and place it on secure footing, two liberal bills were introduced in 1938 that sought to secure federal patronage on a permanent basis through the establishment of a Bureau of Fine Arts. The first bill (introduced by Representative John Coffee of Washington and Senator Claude Pepper of Florida) never made it past the committee stage, while the second (introduced by Representative William Sirovich of New York) was overwhelmingly rejected in June by a vote of 195 to 35.⁹⁸¹

By the spring of 1939, the New York City FAP, which had been the recipient of forty-five percent of project funds and which in 1936 had employed more than 2,200 artists, now had a ceiling lowered to 1,000 artists.⁹⁸² This was the beginning of the end for the FAP and conservatives were more than ready to begin the liquidation process, as was abundantly clear when it was announced that the House Committee on Un-American Activities would be investigating the Federal Writers’ and Theater projects. Although the art and music projects were not themselves investigated, the hearings, which were given massive publicity in the press, uniformly besmirched the reputations of the projects and did much to undermine public support for federal subsidies. By the time the Fair opened an increasingly powerful conservative coalition had Roosevelt on the defensive, and the WPA, being a key symbol of New Deal progressivism, was increasingly vulnerable. Given the mandate of the Fair and its over-riding emphasis on restoring the reputation of big business, one hardly wonders that the planners found the FAP “hazardous” to deal with.

⁹⁷⁹ On this period in relation to the New York projects see Barbara Blumberg, *The New Deal and the Unemployed: The View from New York City* (London: Associated University Press, 1979), pp. 99-123.

⁹⁸⁰ Brinkley, *The End of Reform*, p. 23.

⁹⁸¹ On the bills see McKinzie, *The New Deal*, pp. 151-155.

⁹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 165. For an overview of this period see pp. 149-171 and Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, pp. 147-149.

Five murals highlighting federal accomplishments in a variety of social and cultural spheres were, however, commissioned for the WPA building, including those by Refregier, Eric Mose, Seymour Fogel, and Philip Guston, whose award-winning *Maintaining America's Skills* commanded the exterior space over the entrance to the pavilion (fig. 122).⁹⁸³ That artists welcomed the opportunity to design public murals for what promised to be a large and varied audience was made vividly clear by the Communist Refregier in January 1939: "The work is going full swing. The workshop is the closest to the Renaissance of anything, I am sure, that has ever happened before in the States WE are the mural painters. We hope we are catching up with our great fellow artists of Mexico. We will show what mural painting can be!!"⁹⁸⁴

In addition to those murals secured for the WPA Building, another nine were commissioned by the FAP (with the support of the American Medical Association) for the Medicine and Public Health Building. Diller served on the committee responsible for project murals and he may well have played a key role in ensuring that among the nine panels created for the pavilion, five were decidedly modernist, of which four entirely abstract. The building itself was allotted a particularly visible site just off the Long Island expressway, which skirted the fairgrounds, giving thousands of motorists a panoramic view of the pavilion's curved exterior wall and its brightly coloured mural. Bringing together figurative and abstract elements on the theme of "production," the mural was part of a collaborative effort between de Kooning, Stuyvesant van Veen (a Communist who had previously painted a panoramic view of Pittsburgh in the shape of a hammer and sickle), and Michael Loew (an ardent leftist

⁹⁸³ Guston and Refregier won first and second prize respectively in a competition sponsored by the Mural Artists' Guild of the United Scenic Designers, an AFL union comprised of primarily non-FAP artists. For a discussion of these murals see Berman, *The Lost Years*, pp. 91-95. Interestingly, Guston was one of the few artists to actually paint his own mural. Most artists were not members of the Guild and had accepted the limitation of simply submitting their designs and then turning them over to be blown up by anonymous painters from Guild, who insisted that in order to execute their own murals artists needed to be members in good standing. Although many artists denounced the decision, Whalen had agreed, and the union threatened to strike the Fair unless it was given sole jurisdiction over the execution of all murals. See Olive Lyford Gavert, "The WPA FAP and the New York World's Fair, 1939-1940," *The New Deal Arts Projects*, p. 254.

⁹⁸⁴ Refregier as cited in "Introduction," *Art for the Millions*, pp. 22-23.

who admired de Kooning's work and had recommended him for the job) (figs 123 and 124).⁹⁸⁵

The collaborative mural on the exterior wall of the pavilion was accompanied by four abstract interior murals by Bolotowsky, Browne, Greene, and Schanker (figs 125 to 128). All executed in oil on canvas and uniform in size (10 x 16 feet), the panels were hung above doorways and were, according to McCausland, “designed to perform the function of decorative visual spots in an interior filled with concrete realistic exhibits.”⁹⁸⁶ In contrast to the three figurative panels on the history of medicine designed by Abraham Lishinsky and Irving Block for the same space, the abstractions were explained as enabling visitors to “experience the psychological relief of seeing large areas of color which do not demand close attention but which afford an uncomplicated sense of pleasure.”⁹⁸⁷ While the murals were executed under the auspices of the FAP where the equation of abstraction with the “decorative” was often strategically invoked to assuage doubts about the use of modernist forms, one wonders how the artists felt about their works being positioned as a comforting collective armchair for the weary eyes of visitors to the Fair.

Formally, the murals were not at all unlike those previously executed for Williamsburg and Radio Station WNYC and they manifest the same set of artistic interests and influences. Schanker’s panel was comprised of a not entirely successful amalgam of Cubist and Expressionist devices. Bolotowsky and Browne deployed a familiar fusion of Miró and Mondrian, although where Bolotowsky’s more playful mural is entirely non-objective, Browne’s biomorphic forms are abstracted from

⁹⁸⁵ On Loew’s securing of the commission see Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, *De Kooning, An American Master* (New York: Knopf, 2005), pp. 149-151. On Stuyvesant van Veen see Park and Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas*, pp. 56-59. In 1940 de Kooning executed an additional mural under the auspices of the Section for the US Maritime Commission entitled *Legend and Fact* for the SS President Jackson; see *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1992), pp. 220-221; Patricia Phagan, *For the People: American Mural Drawings of the 1930s and 1940s* (Poughkeepsie, N.Y.: Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, 2007), p. 11; and McKinzie, *The New Deal*, p. 47.

⁹⁸⁶ McCausland, “Preview,” p. 8.

⁹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

microscopic views of microbes. In contrast to these more dynamic works, Greene's mural is characterized by his typically ascetic emphasis on the strict rectilinearity of Neo-Plasticism, albeit rendered in a decidedly non-Neo-Plastic palette of blue, brown, and grey, plus black and white.

Although modernism's associations with science and progress may render the number of abstract commissions for the Medicine and Public Health Building unsurprising, with the clear, precise lines of the well-ordered compositions symbolizing the values and ethos esteemed within the medical profession, Cahill argued that modernist forms were more generally suited to the broader context of Fair. Such forms, he argued, fit particularly well with the exposition's overall theme given that they took as their subject matter "the visual and spatial aspect of the modern industrial world."⁹⁸⁸ Significantly, it was the "abstract realists" as opposed to the "non-objective" artists whose work "mirrors the contemporary industrial world and . . . has also reacted upon the form of industrial products."⁹⁸⁹ Cahill was now espousing an approach to modernist form that—in its emphasis on "realism" and connections to mass culture—was entirely consonant with that which Davis had been elaborating throughout the decade. Cahill concluded that this approach, especially when realized in the form of a mural, was ideally situated not just within the world of today, but within the World of Tomorrow: "The work of the abstract realists is directed toward the expression of our modern industrial society which is displayed so lavishly in the World's Fair, the new forms, the new lighting, the new speed, the new perspectives of today."⁹⁹⁰

'Abstract Realists' at the Fair

Davis and Gorky were each awarded private commissions for murals at the Fair. Although Gorky completed studies for the US Maritime Commission's competition for murals for the Marine Transportation Building at the Fair, they were not accepted (figs 129 and 130).⁹⁹¹ The suggestion of a mural commission had been made by

⁹⁸⁸ Cahill, "American Art Today," pp. 27-28.

⁹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹¹ I am grateful to Patricia Phagan for her helpful correspondence regarding the marine studies.

Gorky's friend the architect William Muschenheim who, like Lescaze, was an ardent champion of modernism. Gorky's horizontal collage, which, with its nautical theme, shared certain elements with Davis's Gloucester compositions, was intended for the dining room of a ship to be displayed at the Fair. Apparently Muschenheim helped Gorky mount the gouaches on a maquette for submission and was bitterly disappointed when it was rejected in favour of a more conventional proposal by Lyonel Feininger, which comprised a series of five vignettes expressing the theme "Shipping Old and New" (fig. 131)⁹⁹²

Gorky did, however, execute *Man's Conquest of the Air* for the Aviation Building (figs 132 and 133). The mural manifests significant formal parallels with his earlier work for the Newark Airport. The building was designed by Lescaze, who was a friend of the artist, and he was instrumental in securing the commission for Gorky, having written to Fair officials on his behalf.⁹⁹³ As Jordan and Goldwater note, it remains uncertain whether the mural was executed in 1938 or 1939. Gorky's personal correspondence suggests the earlier date, given that in a letter of 1 March 1938 he reports that "I complete[d] [the mural] about a week ago;" it is, however, plausible that Gorky was referring to some form of preparatory work, especially given that O'Connor attributed the mural to early 1939 based on Gorky's federal employment record, which confirms his resignation from the project from 11 January to 9 June 1939.⁹⁹⁴ Lescaze later wrote that he had "some say" over how the interior of the building was to be decorated, "though not much to do with the way it was handled," further noting that he did not think that Gorky was pleased about the mural.⁹⁹⁵ The dimensions of the mural are also unknown as it is presumed it met the same fate as all other commissions for the Fair and was destroyed with the building. As a result, it is known only through a handful of sketches and a surviving photographic postcard,

⁹⁹² According to Matossian the maquette and gouache remained in Muschenheim's possession; see *Black Angel*, p. 282.

⁹⁹³ Spender, *From a High Place*, p. 179. Matossian suggests that Lescaze had admired Gorky's work since 1931 in the galleries and in Newark; see Matossian, *Black Angel*, note 7, p. 522.

⁹⁹⁴ See Gorky to Vartoosh, 1 March 1938, "The Letters of Arshile Gorky," *Ararat*, pp. 21-22; this is not one of the letters Matossian lists as a forgery. On the dates see O'Connor, "The Economy of Patronage," p. 95 and Jordan and Goldwater, *Arshile Gorky*, p. 370.

⁹⁹⁵ Lescaze to Wolf Schwabacher, 13 January 1949, as cited in Spender, *From a High Place*, p. 179.

which indicates two separate frieze-like panels installed over a staircase, but this is difficult to substantiate as the photograph significantly crops the overall view.⁹⁹⁶ However, as even this scant remaining visual evidence demonstrates, Gorky once again relied upon a Légeresque machine aesthetic (which was entirely appropriate to the theme) and the catalogue of imagery closely follows that of the 1936 Newark panels. For example, the autogyro, whose source lay in Wyatt Davis's photographs for the previous commission, assumes a central position in the composition, while elements such as searchlights, landing gear, and other paraphernalia associated with flight appear in an unaltered form.

Davis's *History of Communication* mural, by far his most ambitious and visible work of the decade, was a private commission for the Communications Hall (figs 134 to 136). Although Davis had been engaged as a juror for the selection of the contemporary painting exhibition *American Art Today*, he was not, despite his efforts, awarded a mural commission until the eleventh hour. When the Fair was in its early planning stages the Artists' Union was worried about issues of fairness and transparency in the awarding of commissions. *Art Front* ran a statement detailing the fact that, despite all the publicity surrounding the event, no mention had been made about decorative plans, yet it was rumoured that a few artists had already been approached privately for designs. This was unacceptable given that while the Fair was run by a private corporation, it had the full cooperation of municipal officials and was "essentially a public affair."⁹⁹⁷ Citing the FAP as a model to emulate, *Art Front* was adamant that both artists and public had "a right to demand a fair and open conduct of expenditures to be used for the arts and decoration."⁹⁹⁸ Shortly thereafter, in the spring of 1936, the Fair Corporation established an elaborate process for assigning mural commissions. A council from the Architectural League was set up to compile a list of artists who were then invited to submit sketches; from these submissions a subsequent list was drawn up and used as the basis for awarding commissions, with each mural

⁹⁹⁶ The postcard is in the collection of the New York Public Library, of which the Whitney Museum has a copy.

⁹⁹⁷ "The Coming World's Fair," *AF* 2.4 (March 1936), p. 4.

⁹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

subject to the approval of the Fair's Board of Design, which was under the direction of Teague.

Davis responded to the invitation to submit sketches in August 1936, and then again in September, but to no avail.⁹⁹⁹ His campaign for a commission remained unsuccessful until finally he enlisted the assistance of Donald Deskey, the designer with whom he had previously worked on the Radio City Music mural *Men Without Women* (1932), and who was now responsible for the focal exhibit in the Communications Hall (fig. 137). On 9 January 1939 Davis began his plan for a mural on communications, although approval was not officially granted until six weeks before the Fair's public opening in April.¹⁰⁰⁰ Following Teague's prospectus, Deskey sought to emphasize the role of communications as the nervous system of modern society.¹⁰⁰¹ Electing to represent this role symbolically, he presented "Man" as a twenty-foot tall transparent plastic head. When "Man" spoke the symbols of seven instruments of communication (postal service; printed word; telegraph; telephone; motion picture; radio, and television) materialized on a disk in front of him, and their images were projected on a thirty-foot plastic globe suspended at the opposite end of the hall. Serving to complement Deskey's focal exhibit, Davis's mammoth mural (measuring 45 x 140 feet) tackled the evolution of the history of communication from ancient to modern times in a network of intricate line drawings.¹⁰⁰² While he acknowledged the importance of earlier forms used in the transmission of information, the mural focused on contemporary innovations and emphasized the significance of mass communication in the development of modern civilization.

⁹⁹⁹ William Agee, "The Murals, 1921-1957" in Boyajian and Rutkoff, *Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 2, pp. 86-87.

¹⁰⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹⁰⁰¹ Cusker, "The World of Tomorrow," p. 8.

¹⁰⁰² In *Dawn of a New Day* the catalogue entry for the mural (p. 82) claims that it occupied the left-hand interior wall of the exhibit; however, in the *Catalogue Raisonné* Agee claims, in contradistinction to all other sources and without a footnote, that it was executed for the circular wall outside the Hall (p. 86). Unfortunately no photograph of the work in situ has surfaced and there are no known images of it in its completed form; see Boyajian and Rutkoff, *Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 2, cat. nos 651-658. A simulation of the mural (rendered through a negative photographic print of a study [cat. no. 658]) has been used extensively in the literature referencing the lost mural. In my correspondence with Earl Davis he has confirmed that he does not know where the mural was located nor what evidence Agee has used to support his claim.

Davis's sprawling jumble of calligraphy has the visual dynamism and impact of graffiti. Known only through surviving sketches the mural was intended for execution in fluorescent white paint in order to lend it a luminous quality in the low light of the Hall. This would have created an effect not unlike that of a neon sign or illuminated billboard and would have suited Davis's abiding interest in the forms of mass culture. However, budgetary and/or technical restrictions were imposed and the work was painted in white on a solid black background.¹⁰⁰³ The mix of text and images arrayed across a uniformly flat ground, combined with a palette restricted to black and white, makes the mural reminiscent of a newspaper. As was the case with *Swing Landscape*, Davis approached the composition through an "accumulation of individual parts" that worked "dialectically to produce the end product which is a unity of opposites."¹⁰⁰⁴ Despite its lack of colour, the collaging of disparate elements invests the mural with a considerable amount formal energy and visual impact.

Davis and his wife, Roselle Springer, gathered a wide range of source imagery on which he based his studies and he made copious notes on various aspects of the mural's form and content. Taking a literal approach to the subject, he followed the history of communication as it developed technologically, juxtaposing bodily agents with their mechanical extensions and tracing the steps leading from speech, sign language, smoke signals, and carrier pigeons, to the emergence of the printing press, postal service, wireless telegraph, camera, radio, phonograph, motion picture, and television.¹⁰⁰⁵ Davis was also particularly sensitive to the specificities of the mural's context and audience (as he was with previous commissions) and described his intentions as follows: "The mural has an ideological content which dramatizes the development of communication between men. Such a theme can be expressed in many ways and with different scopes. In this case the requirement is to express the idea in a

¹⁰⁰³ Here too a discrepancy exists: the catalogue entry in *Dawn of a New Day* suggests that fluorescent paint was abandoned for budgetary reasons (p. 82), while Agee states that it was "for lack of the technical means to complete it" (p. 87). That Davis conceded to having his mural executed by Guild members rather than joining the union (as Guston did) was no doubt due to his problems with the AFL.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Davis, "Mural for the Hall of Communications;" extracts of working notes reprinted in Kelder, *Stuart Davis*, p. 80.

¹⁰⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 81; 71-78.

single panel in a decorative form.”¹⁰⁰⁶ There was no need for the mural to be overtly didactic for, as he continued, “The technical information relating to the idea is supplied by other mediums in the same building. The function of this mural then is concerned only with the aesthetics of the subject.”¹⁰⁰⁷ Surely thinking of the way in which contemporary advertising worked and likening the effect to that of music — where one may not remember the lyrics but is able to hum the tune — he endeavoured to create an image that would be “impressed” upon the audience’s mind and would be “simple and easy to remember:” “In recalling the mural the spectator will not remember dates, costumes, materials of construction, correct historical sequence, or factual information;” instead, the viewer “will have a pleasant and stimulating recollection of shape-objects in space in relation to each other.”¹⁰⁰⁸

The lack of overt political content, combined with Davis’s own assertion that the mural was “decorative” and “concerned only with aesthetics of the subject,” has led scholars such as Whiting to claim that it was “at home within the decidedly non-Marxist” Fair, whatever the artist’s “revolutionary ideas.”¹⁰⁰⁹ However, this assertion is superficial at best, and misleading at worst, serving only to miss yet again Davis’s sophisticated understanding of both his own practice and the category of art more generally. As Hemingway asserts, Davis was “perhaps somewhat more aware of the determining effects of context than Whiting acknowledges” and “in other circumstances [the mural] could have had a different meaning.”¹⁰¹⁰ To begin with, Whiting’s reductive reading takes no account of Davis’s repeated assertions that it was not the job of art to serve political ideology in a direct way. Ruminating on contemporary definitions of social art only months before the opening of the Fair, he continued to insist that “To denominate works which have an immediate social, political, or economic reference as ‘social content’ art is a mistake:”

¹⁰⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹⁰⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 81; 80. For a detailed analysis of the mural’s iconography see Sims, *American Painter*, pp. 247-248.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*, p. 81.

¹⁰¹⁰ Hemingway, “Fictional Unities,” p. 114.

First, it implies that art without this immediate reference is devoid of 'social content.' Second, to call a work which does not have the basic intention of being a work of art but instead of being a source of information for action, outside the field of art, to call such a work 'art' is to mislead and confuse issues. The 'Social content in Art' propaganda by the cultural front of the left has been guilty of this error.¹⁰¹¹

Davis had consistently taken issue with calls from the left for art to be instrumentalized as illustration or propaganda, and while he had always rejected the Party's views on aesthetic matters, by early 1939 he was also becoming increasingly disillusioned with political matters as well, a disillusionment which would shortly lead to a final and irreparable break. However, this did not immediately affect his approach to art or compromise his commitment to dialectical materialism, and his notes on the Fair commission offer his most incisive elaboration of the theory as it applied to art.

According to Davis, it was entirely possible for a work of art to be "Art" and also refer to immediate events, but the two qualities were "definitely separate."¹⁰¹² As he argued, "If such a work is preserved by future generations it will be because of its Art content, not its social content," as was evident, for example, in the continued appreciation of artists such as El Greco, whose pictures remained valuable to contemporary viewers not because of but *despite* their religious symbolism.¹⁰¹³ The point here, and one Davis had been making throughout the 1930s, was that formal and technical advances in art — regardless of their point of origin — were progressive in and of themselves. To deny this amounted to a denial of the ability to know parts in isolation from one another and, as such, was not only a "metaphysical" approach to art, but was equivalent to "the theory of totalitarianism."¹⁰¹⁴ Seeking to distinguish this from the theory of dialectical materialism, Davis argued that the latter, "which assumes the revolutionary development of reality and the concept of the unity of opposites and the change of an isolate into its opposite," did not in any sense lead to the conclusions of

¹⁰¹¹ Davis papers, 30 January 1939, reprinted in Kelder, *Stuart*, pp. 86-89.

¹⁰¹² *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹⁴ *Ibid.*

the “social content in art” school of thought.¹⁰¹⁵ Such conclusions were “purely political and expedient in character.” Furthermore, the assertion that historical artworks could not be appreciated without full consideration of these social relations was in itself “a denial of the theory of dialectical materialism.”¹⁰¹⁶ To argue that this was “formalism” or an arbitrary separation of form and content was false because it implied “a non-material reality.”¹⁰¹⁷ As Davis continued:

It implies that the physical nature of these works of art is unique to their specific social reference to their own time, and that for the work to have meaning both the form and the content of social relations must be understood. But this implied assertion is the very acme of a static concept of reality and therefore anti-dialectical. It means that each form-content unit is eternal and that its meaning does not change.¹⁰¹⁸

As is evident, Davis’s thinking on art continued to be underpinned by Marxist theory through to the end of the decade. Moreover, in his *History of Communications* mural this theoretical framework was transposed onto a theme that was at once as “modern” as it was “real.” The World’s Fair was, however, to furnish one of the last contexts in which the artistic model espoused by Davis could be realized. Federal patronage for the arts, and with it the notion of a modernist public art, were about to be written off. By the time the Fair closed in October 1940 what remained of the projects was given over to the war effort and they were fully dismantled in 1943.¹⁰¹⁹ Furthermore, the model of art promulgated by Cahill — one where “The artist has had an increasing sense of participation in the life and thought and movement of his time and a deepening interest in social ideas” — was soon to prove as undesirable as it was untenable.¹⁰²⁰

¹⁰¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹⁹ On the demise of the FAP see McKinzie, *The New Deal*, pp. 149-171 and Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation*, pp. 219-234.

¹⁰²⁰ Cahill, “American Art Today,” p. 28.

As Davis had already observed in his notes in a lengthy analysis of the politics surrounding the Fair, the World of Tomorrow was “a business mans [sic] plan” and art was only included “to make their presentation attractive.”¹⁰²¹ Although his mural did not manifest this cynicism, another painting related to the event arguably did. Prior to securing the Fair commission he was invited to visually “interpret” the exposition for *Harper’s Bazaar*. The resulting gouache, entitled *Impression of the New York Word’s Fair* (fig. 138), appeared in the February 1939 issue. Interestingly, Harrison offers a discussion of the painting that, while describing the colourful collage as “optimistically upbeat,” also suggests ways in which it may be seen as a skeptical rebuke of the Fair’s “visionary pretensions.”¹⁰²² Not only was the chaotic composition markedly different from the unified and orderly World of Tomorrow, thereby making Davis’s version “curiously at odds with the planners’ grand designs,” but his decision to consign a miniaturized Trylon and Perisphere to the outer periphery of the image bore no relation whatsoever to their importance in the exposition’s thematic plan.¹⁰²³ Relegating the Fair’s most significant landmarks and immediately recognizable symbols to the status of incidental elements, Davis was, as Harrison puts it, at “his most iconoclastic.”¹⁰²⁴ Moreover, no reference is made to modernist muralism or to any of the government buildings. In fact, the only artwork he quoted was an entirely banal allegorical panel by Herman Van Cott (painted on the exterior of the Operations Building in the Production and Distribution zone) and he ignored federal displays in favour of myriad symbols of American consumerism. Davis’s interpretation of the Fair gave pride of place to the academic artistic tradition he despised and highlighted the ways in which the event was dominated by commercial interests.¹⁰²⁵

That Davis’s *Impression* of the Fair would be derisive is unsurprising. While the Fair Corporation commissioned some 105 murals (in addition to those sponsored by private corporations), thereby providing visitors with an opportunity to experience

¹⁰²¹ Davis papers, 17 October 1938 (?).

¹⁰²² Harrison, “Stuart Davis’ ‘World of Tomorrow,’” *American Art* 9.3 (Autumn 1995), pp. 96-99.

¹⁰²³ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁰²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

public art on a scale and to an extent never before seen at such an exposition, the Board of Design's interest in aesthetic matters was largely defined by the needs and ambitions of the planners, the majority of whom were either directly involved in commerce and industry or were industrial designers seeking to aestheticize and promote the interests of the corporate elite. For once, Watson was in complete agreement with Davis, commenting that artists were only dragged into the Fair to aid "big businessmen" with their "big talk."¹⁰²⁶ Thoroughly lambasting the entire enterprise, he dismissed Whalen's "philosophical waggeries about a 'world of tomorrow' and a happier way of American living," scoffing that he and his cronies "wished to organize the largest advertising show on earth and make it pay."¹⁰²⁷ This in and of itself was not the main problem for Watson; rather, it was the way art was instrumentalized to suit their interests: "The management did not hire mural painters, sculptors and commercial designers in order . . . to advance civilization," instead, the "whole vast and heterogeneous project is designed to stimulate buying and selling" — an evaluation with which I agree.¹⁰²⁸

My point here is that while public murals were a significant component of the Fair, they were neither positioned nor understood in the way that Cahill and other supporters of muralism perceived it — namely, as an ideal means of democratizing the arts in the interest of developing a more inclusive public culture *and* as an alternative to the imbrication of the arts within the gallery and market system. Instead, murals were incorporated into the World of Tomorrow as decorative adjuncts that gave the planners's "promotional twaddle" a civilizing veneer of culture.¹⁰²⁹ Perceived as "lending enchanting gaiety to miles of walls," muralism was once again being demoted to the other side of the modernist antinomy, one where it was pitted against, and devalued in relation to, the pictorial.¹⁰³⁰

¹⁰²⁶ Watson, "Murals at the Fair," *MA* (May 1939), p. 282.

¹⁰²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

¹⁰³⁰ *Ibid.*

American Art Today and the World of Tomorrow

That the arts did not occupy a central role within the Fair's vision of the World of Tomorrow was further demonstrated by the fact that original plans for the exposition did not include an exhibition programme or any venue for showcasing contemporary American art. As Davis noted, the implication was that "American Art Today had no place in the World of Tomorrow."¹⁰³¹ Both the Masterpieces of Art (fig. 139) and Contemporary Arts Buildings (figs 140 and 141) were afterthoughts and were only instituted at a fairly late stage of preparations following the "public furor" over such an omission. This was combined with the pressure put upon Fair officials during a series of discussions between the Board of Design and a co-ordinating committee (chaired by the Communist Hugo Gellert) of representatives from sixteen New York artists's organizations.¹⁰³² In view of the increased creative activity initiated during the decade through the arts projects, critics and commentators demanded to know how an event addressed to "building the world of tomorrow" could see fit to omit such a culturally significant phenomenon. As Jewell contended, although planners intended to showcase American developments in commerce, industry, science, and education, surely "these cannot constitute all of the world of tomorrow, any more than they constitute all of the world of today, or alone sufficed for yesterday."¹⁰³³ Whatever else the Fair sought to accomplish, it "cannot acquit itself of full responsibility in the way of opening up the approach to a triumphant Tomorrow without giving art a somewhat better break."¹⁰³⁴ Negotiations continued for more than a year until support from the press and Mayor La Guardia forced officials to yield to increasing pressure for recognition of American art within the exposition.

The Masterpieces of Art Building was primarily financed by the Guggenheim Foundation and consisted of over 400 paintings from museums and private collections in the US and abroad, surveying European art from the thirteenth through to the nineteenth century. In contrast to this foreign focus, the Contemporary Art Building

¹⁰³¹ Davis, "Exhibition of American Art is Democratic in Scope," *New York Post*, 29 April 1939.

¹⁰³² Gavert, "The WPA FAP," p. 258.

¹⁰³³ Jewell, "Tomorrow, Inc.," p. 4.

¹⁰³⁴ *Ibid.*

housed a large exhibition dedicated to *American Art Today* during the Fair's first season. Early in 1940 officials contributed the use of the Contemporary Art Building to the New York City WPA. In this instance, eight galleries were devoted to workshop demonstrations and four galleries to rotating art exhibits displaying a survey of over 800 FAP works.¹⁰³⁵

The *American Art Today* exhibition was headed up by a Governing Committee whose members included the directors of MoMA, the Whitney, and the Metropolitan Museum, along with an Artists' Committee, on which Davis served in his role as National Chairman of the Congress. Cahill was a member of both groups and was appointed director of the exhibition.¹⁰³⁶ Intended to showcase contemporary painting in all its phases, and with every section of the US represented, the exhibition comprised some 1,200 paintings, sculptures, prints and drawings selected from over 25,000 entries, with the New York area furnishing approximately forty per cent of the total. Despite the progressive political underpinnings of Cahill's desire to mount a "democratic" exhibition and his attempts to ensure that the selection system was "a veritable mirror of the democratic process," the issue of democracy with respect to style was not so clear-cut. As Harold Devree noted in the *Magazine of Art*, the show served to raise old questions anew.¹⁰³⁷ In addition to democratizing cultural practice by ensuring wider access to the arts, did it equate to an "anything goes" attitude in stylistic terms? Or did it mean identifying a particular visual idiom that could stand as the art of democracy?

The majority of works included in the *American Art Today* show adhered to the "American Scene," with some critics, such as Donald Bear, greeting this as cause for celebration. According to Bear, Director of the Denver Art Museum and regional consultant for the Rocky Mountain section, the preponderance of the American Scene

¹⁰³⁵ For a first-hand account of both exhibitions see Gavert, "The WPA FAP," pp. 258-267.

¹⁰³⁶ Davis's brief essay in the accompanying catalogue includes the membership of the committees and elaborates upon how the selection process worked; see his "On Contemporary Painting," *American Art Today*, n. p.

¹⁰³⁷ Howard Devree, "Art and Democracy," *MA* 32.5 (May 1939), p. 262. Although Devree maintains that Cahill's efforts were laudable, he offers an incisive critique of the ostensibly democratic selection process; see pp. 262-266.

aesthetic was a testament to “a healthy national movement and interest in an American art expressing the life of American people;” as such, it was deemed to demonstrate the very “ideal of Democracy.”¹⁰³⁸ Other critics offered more balanced appraisals. There was “relatively little” social art in the exhibition, with interiors and landscapes dominating, and differing approaches to abstraction were represented through works by artists such as Browne, Davis, Greene, Holty, Schanker, and Xceron.¹⁰³⁹ Although earlier in the decade the American Scene bias of the show (not to mention the widely remarked dearth of social art) might well have incited some vitriol-laden exchanges between artists and critics, these battles were now set aside in the interest of pursuing more pressing matters, namely cuts to the arts projects and the issue of democracy and freedom of expression in relation to the mounting threat of fascism.

Although the move to the Democratic Front demonstrated that the Party had already made important moves toward embracing the New Deal, as the threat to the FAP’s very existence became evident, especially in the heated debates around the arts bill, the Communist press insistently celebrated the achievements of the project and, decrying attacks on the New Deal from the “barbarians on Capitol Hill,” almost uniformly lauded FAP art at the Fair.¹⁰⁴⁰ *New Masses* critic M. R. Linden praised the show “for its democracy of purpose and of import,” while McCausland’s appraisal in *Parnassus* similarly concluded that it was nothing short of “proof of democracy in the arts.”¹⁰⁴¹ Somewhat more surprisingly, the Fair itself was rather optimistically, if not just plain naively, reported by the *Daily Worker* to indicate that the World of Tomorrow would be a socialist one: “The World’s Fair says — even if it does not know it [!] — that poverty, unemployment, back-breaking work, disease and

¹⁰³⁸ M. R. Linden, “Art at the Fair: The American Scene Reflected in a Vast Popular Exhibit,” *NM* 31 (13 June 1939), pp. 30-31. Donald Bear, “For the New York World’s Fair Contemporary Art Exhibition,” *Parnassus* 11.3 (March 1939), p. 18. Similar views are reiterated in Bear’s “American Art Today,” *MA* 32.5 (May 1939), pp. 271; 317-318.

¹⁰³⁹ For example, see Devree, “Art and Democracy,” p. 266 and McCausland, “Living American Art.”

¹⁰⁴⁰ See, for example, Joseph Starobin, “Barbarians on Capitol Hill,” *NM* 31 (9 May 1939); “The US Arts Projects,” *NM* 31 (16 May 1939); and “America Comes into its Own in the World of Art, Culture,” *DW*, 30 April 1939.

¹⁰⁴¹ Linden, “Art at the Fair,” p. 31; McCausland, “Living American Art,” p. 17.

insecurity are needless burdens. The people feel it as they look at the 'World of Tomorrow.'"¹⁰⁴²

Even Davis, who had consistently taken issue with the narrow limits ascribed to both social art and the American Scene, and who had serious reservations about the Fair as an unapologetically capitalist enterprise, publicly championed the exhibition. In both his review of *American Art Today* and in his brief text in the accompanying catalogue he drew attention to events in Europe as a backdrop to Cahill's efforts, insisting that "In these times when the word 'democracy' has taken on such special significance the exhibition must be appreciated as a product of the true spirit of democracy and it must remain for a long time to come a model for the organization of large representative exhibitions."¹⁰⁴³ In July 1939, a few months after the Fair opened, he even entered into a rancorous exchange in the pages of *The Nation* with one Christopher Lazare, who saw in the *American Art Today* exhibition "nothing more than canceled tidbits of aesthetic slang" and images "reduced to the imitation and parody of a foreign tongue."¹⁰⁴⁴ Davis branded Lazare's comments "vicious nonsense" and lashed out at his conclusion that Whalen had been correct in the first place in holding that there was no need for a show of fine arts at the Fair. For Davis, this went beyond fascist censorship in art "since it involves complete eradication of art expression."¹⁰⁴⁵

In his *Art for the Millions* essay (the first draft of which was written a month after this exchange and symptomatically subtitled "Democracy — and Reaction") Davis further emphasized that the show was organized and selected by artists "in the most democratic way possible."¹⁰⁴⁶ Although he lamented there was only a "slight recognition of the form and content of modern or abstract art," such exhibitions were nevertheless of the utmost importance in fighting against "monopoly in culture" and

¹⁰⁴² "The World's Fair — It's Really Grand," *DW*, 2 May 1939.

¹⁰⁴³ Davis, "Abstract Painting Today," p. 121; *American Art Today*, n. p.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Christopher Lazare, "American Art at the Fair," *The Nation* 149 (1 July 1939), p. 24.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Davis, "Art at the Fair," *The Nation* 149 (22 July 1939), p. 12. Lazare was to have the last word; see "Art and 'Facts,'" *The Nation* 149 (29 July 1939), p. 132.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Davis, "Abstract Painting Today," pp. 124-125.

were only possible as a result of federal patronage.¹⁰⁴⁷ As Davis concluded, while both the Fair and the exhibition were not without their shortcomings, “American painting has the potentialities of a great future, but that too is definitely tied in with Federal support of art.”¹⁰⁴⁸ The tragic irony here is that as both the New Deal and its arts projects came under increasing attack from the right, the vehemence with which the Party and fellow-travellers such as Davis praised and defended them only gave further credence to conservative charges that they were a hotbed of Communist activity.

Taking a more critical view of the Fair than was characteristic of the majority of assessments, James Johnson Sweeney questioned the more long-term results that would derive from the exposition’s emphases. While many walls were adorned with murals, they tended to be perceived as “decorative” rather than as art per se, whereas “art” understood as such was cordoned off in purpose-built spaces. As Sweeney pointed out, while early statements of the aims of the Fair were insistent on the complete interpenetration of art and everyday life, the event seemed to encourage “an approach to plastic art expression as something that should be isolated in museums.”¹⁰⁴⁹ What he was getting at was that with its *Museums* of Masterpieces and *Galleries* of Contemporary Art, the Fair began to re-entrench the very system that the arts projects in general, and the mural in particular, had sought to undermine — namely a market economy for cultural production that isolated both art and artist and where museums and galleries were among the major barriers to a broader engagement with culture on the part of the general public.

While in later public statements Fair authorities pitched the keynote of the *American Art Today* exhibition as a demonstration of “Democracy in Art,” they completely contradicted previous assertions on the “interpenetrating” of art and life by deciding to “give art a distinct and *separate place* in the exposition.”¹⁰⁵⁰ As Sweeney concluded, “perhaps the first step toward ‘Building a Better World of Tomorrow’ in the field of

¹⁰⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 123-125.

¹⁰⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Sweeney, “Thoughts Before the World’s Fair,” *Parnassus* 11.3 (March 1939), p. 7.

¹⁰⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Art would have been to attack the museum approach without any reserve and emphasize the need to look to the everyday world for the vital formal and emotional experiences from which the art of tomorrow will be built.”¹⁰⁵¹ Indeed, if the Fair was taken as a guide for practice in the World of Tomorrow, his comments highlight how very different this model would be from that set forth under the New Deal. The very notion of the “Masterpiece,” which Cahill denounced as “primarily a collector’s idea . . . related to a whole series of commercial magnifications which have very little to do with the needs of society” and the dislocation of art in “Museums” and “Galleries,” which produced “aesthetic fragments torn from their social background,” had been among those aspects of the pre-FAP cultural milieu that Cahill had expressly sought to overcome.¹⁰⁵²

Modernism for the Masses in Decline

Although guided by a disparate set of interests and aspirations, and catering to a different audience (more preaching to the initiated than seeking to make converts), the Museum of Modern Art’s vision of the future complemented that of the Fair.¹⁰⁵³ While, as Smith suggests, the Fair is usually recalled as “a domain of the modern in its most futuristic, symbolic, and obvious form, as fantastic and unrealistic as any sideshow,” the museum is renowned for its commitment to a certain historical teleology and formal purity characterizing the “true” modernism.¹⁰⁵⁴ In the decade since its founding MoMA had already achieved a prominent cultural position, influencing countless other galleries, exhibitions, and texts.¹⁰⁵⁵ As Helen Appleton Read observed in June 1939, “Through its carefully chosen and interrelated exhibitions, the lucid and authoritative catalogs, the affiliated branch museums, and last but not least, through a publicity campaign second to none, it has done more to bridge the schism between contemporary art and contemporary taste than has any

¹⁰⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁵² Cahill, “American Resources,” p. 25; Cahill, *New Horizons*, pp. 11-12.

¹⁰⁵³ Stern, “International Style: Immediate Effects,” *Progressive Architecture* 63 (2 February 1982), p. 106.

¹⁰⁵⁴ Smith, *Making the Modern*, pp. 385-386.

¹⁰⁵⁵ On the museum see Russell Lynes, *Good Old Modern: An Intimate Portrait of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Atheneum, 1973); Sam Hunter, *The Museum of Modern Art, New York: The History and the Collection* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984); and Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr.*

other single agent.”¹⁰⁵⁶ That being said, it is important not to overestimate the influence of any one institution in determining contemporary taste, and certainly no vision of what constitutes contemporary art was ever monolithic or uncontested, especially given the significance of the arts projects during the museum’s first ten years in operation. Nevertheless, the ways in which MoMA positioned art within the larger culture and the aesthetic choices promulgated through its activities were significant during the 1930s and would become increasingly dominant in the decades to follow. Moreover, while there was a far greater variety of art being produced and shown in the 1940s than has previously been recognized, with the narrowly circumscribed approach to modernism championed by Greenberg et al. only taking centre stage considerably later than most accounts suggest, the museum had set a recognizable course by the end of the 1930s that would congeal into postwar orthodoxy.¹⁰⁵⁷

That this institution, run as it was by powerful members of the corporate sector, positioned itself as the propagator of a conservative modernist aestheticism was amply demonstrated by its collecting practices and exhibition programme, of which two examples will amply suffice. Firstly, as discussed previously, Johnson and Hitchcock inaugurated the opening of the museum’s architectural department with an exhibition that sought to strip modern architecture of its politics and in so doing either ignored or ridiculed the social commitments of the architects. The buildings were treated in purely stylistic terms, as was made explicit in Barr’s preface to the accompanying catalogue when he confirmed that “the aesthetic qualities of the Style are the principal concern” and little attempt had been made to present “sociological aspects” of the style “except in so far as they related to problems of design.”¹⁰⁵⁸ Although, as Smith points out, to these architects the very notion of a modern *style* was a contradiction given their total commitment to functionalism, Barr suggested that their designs

¹⁰⁵⁶ Helen Appleton Read, “Art in Our Time,” *MA* 32.6 (June 1939), p. 339.

¹⁰⁵⁷ The “eclecticism” and “catholicity” of art at the end of the 1930s was widely noted. See, for example, Cahill, “American Resources,” p. 32 and Read, “Art in Our Time,” p. 341.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Barr, “Preface,” *The International Style*, p. 13.

should be evaluated in stylistic terms alone.¹⁰⁵⁹ Indeed, his assessment of their achievements was largely based on cultivating an association between the “International Style” and European abstract painting, rather than with the functionalist ideals of the left. The violence thus done to inter-war modernism — a violence that went some distance toward enabling the productive union between corporate capital and modern architecture that was showcased at the Fair and which would become a mainstay of American culture — was similarly carried out upon modern art more generally a few years later.

It was in 1936, on the occasion of the seminal exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, that Barr codified and presented his now iconic history of modernism (figs 142 and 143). This simplified and exclusionary genealogy (which would henceforth serve as the framework around which the museum and its activities were organized) was equally as reductive as the museum’s take on architecture. Sybil Gordon Kantor nicely sums up Barr’s teleological scheme as one in which “the historical context was limited to a stylistic chronology that ignored all other social, political, or psychological contingencies.”¹⁰⁶⁰ By once again completely decontextualizing modernist practice and evaluating it solely according to formal criteria, the museum was the purveyor of yet another normative stylistic narrative — what Smith wryly terms “a connoisseur’s checklist” — that nicely fitted the aims of the East Coast elite, for whom the museum was “the key high cultural instrument.”¹⁰⁶¹

¹⁰⁵⁹ Smith, *Making the Modern*, pp. 396-397; Barr, *The International Style*, pp. 13-14; Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr.*, p. 296. Many of the architects involved in the exhibition argued that labelling the new architecture a “style” negated the social imperatives of its aims; for example, Gropius flatly denied the idea of a “style,” while Sigfried Giedion completely ignored the term in his influential book *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1941). See Kantor, note 71, p. 440.

¹⁰⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 314. Schapiro provides a trenchant critique of Barr’s position in “Nature of Abstract Art” (1937), reprinted in *Modern Art*, pp. 188-190. For a discussion of Schapiro’s text see Hemingway, “Meyer Schapiro and Marxism,” pp. 20-21.

¹⁰⁶¹ Smith, *Making the Modern*, pp. 401; 395.

More to the point, Barr's formalist framework (which precluded American abstraction as it was judged not to have contributed to international developments) divested art-historical analysis of any interpretive responsibility for social, economic, or political contingencies that existed beyond the confines of the artwork itself. By focusing solely on that which could be seen, and by renouncing the reality of the cultural conditions in which art is produced for the physical reality of the work of art alone, he radically circumscribed the terms for debate around modernist practices. Furthermore, by 1939 it had become clear that the museum was also capable of serving the state on its own terms, and that it would be valued for doing so even by the champion of government welfare provision. In a fireside chat on May 10th Roosevelt referred to the museum as a "citadel of culture" and made the oft-quoted remark that "The conditions for democracy and for art are one and the same..."¹⁰⁶² One can only wonder if he had already come to the realization that in the decades to follow, democracy, like art, would be dependent upon consumerism, conspicuous consumption, and the demands of corporate capital.

The museum's *Art in Our Time* exhibition was mounted in conjunction with the Fair and marked the opening of its shining new glass and steel "International Style" quarters on 53rd Street (fig. 144). According to Barr, the show was "planned along the general lines of the Museum's organization" and was "intended to give some idea of the different kinds of art with which the Museum is concerned."¹⁰⁶³ Although the exhibition covered a wide range of works in a variety of media (including sections on architecture, industrial design, and film), the centerpiece was twentieth-century painting. As had been the case throughout the decade, in international terms, this meant a focus on the French avant-garde from Impressionism to Surrealism (with Picasso, Cézanne and Matisse being particularly well-represented) and nationally, a clear preference for the American Scene coupled with a distinct lack of interest in domestic developments in abstraction.¹⁰⁶⁴

¹⁰⁶² Roosevelt as cited in *Herald Tribune*, 11 May 1939.

¹⁰⁶³ Barr, *Art in Our Time* (1939; New York: Arno Press, 1972), p. 13.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Davis was the only modernist on the left included in this show and was represented by *Cape Ann Landscape* (1938) (Mr. and Mrs. Robert A. Stein, Dayton, Ohio).

While the stylistic biases of the show did not surprise commentators given that there was wide agreement that realism continued to be the most salient characteristic in American painting, what was deemed something of a shock was that muralism — having undergone a veritable “renaissance” during the decade and championed by the museum itself in its 1932 exhibition — was entirely absent. As Read lamented with a mix of disappointment and disbelief, “it seems a serious omission in any survey of the art of our times that no place has been found for the murals . . . which American artists been have producing under the sponsorship of the US government.”¹⁰⁶⁵ She continued, “A movement which is engaging so much of the best talent and which is revealing and developing so much that is fresh and native, should have been represented if only by photographs of the work in place.”¹⁰⁶⁶ Surely, she insisted, muralism would have been the most “encouraging” aspect of the presentation and “would have demonstrated that art in America is entering upon a new phase.”¹⁰⁶⁷ However, in direct contradistinction to the muralism of the 1930s, marked as it was by radical and reformist aspirations for a publicly-funded and democratically accessible art, the museum championed the private culture of easel painting and the subordination of artistic practice to the logic of the market. Moreover, in contrast to an approach to cultural production that, as Cahill described it, esteemed art as part of “the significant life of the community” and insisted upon the necessary “unity of the arts with the activities, the objects, and the scene of everyday life,” MoMA was committed to an autonomy and exclusivity for art that prioritized formal values alone.

Looked at retrospectively, the New York World’s Fair, in combination with MoMA’s *Art in Our Time* exhibition, marked the moment when the model of artistic practice championed by modernists throughout the 1930s, one in which a public culture was created under the auspices of the state for a mass audience, was shown to be unsustainable. For if the Fair laid the groundwork for a “World of Tomorrow” that was corporate-led and consumption-driven, its model of a corporate modernism for

¹⁰⁶⁵ Read, “Art in Our Time,” p. 341.

¹⁰⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

mass consumption was complemented by the museum's high cultural variety. With its formalist priorities and elitist practices the museum effectively denied the continuing viability of the approach to modernism pursued by Davis and Gorky throughout the decade — an approach that was premised upon the belief that modernist forms were consonant with a realist aesthetic and a radical political perspective, and that the masses had a right to art as part of their everyday lives. Indeed, the murals produced by leftists such as Davis and Gorky offered a very different set of aesthetic and ideological priorities from those that were ultimately canonized during the postwar period.

As Marshall Berman asks, "Where did it all go wrong? How did the modern visions of the 1930s turn sour in the process of their realization?"¹⁰⁶⁸ As the decade came to a close a number of factors coalesced to challenge the model of artistic practice cultivated under the New Deal. Visions of a public culture created under the auspices of the state for a mass audience which was, in turn, mediated by labour and the union movement, were to be rendered unsustainable. For many radical artists, the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact in August 1939, followed by the invasion of Finland, prompted a definitive rupture with Communism. Yet as Pells asserts, the pressure of external events was not the only, or even the most significant, reason that the potential of the decade's early years failed to be fulfilled.¹⁰⁶⁹ The subsequent fracturing of the left and the collapse of the Popular Front coincided with the growing strength of a conservative coalition of Southern Democrats and Republicans whose rampant anti-Communism led to an escalating witchhunt. Within a few years of the Fair's closing the arts projects were dismantled and many artists had already begun to renew the relationship that, historically, abided between artist and patron and were forced to accept a dramatically circumscribed audience for their art. As one might expect, their ascent into the ivory tower was characterized by the pursuit of a more individualistic notion of artistic practice and a reaffirming of the centrality of aesthetics within the modernist enterprise. As Berman observes, in many ways, it was

¹⁰⁶⁸ Marshall Berman, *All That's Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 304.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Pells, *Radical Visions*, p. 311.

there in Flushing Meadow (fig. 145) just at the moment when the “fervent faith that modern technology and social organization could create a world without ashes — that the modernism of the 1930s came to end.”¹⁰⁷⁰

¹⁰⁷⁰ Berman, *All That's Solid*, p. 304.

Conclusion

Richard Pells has offered an incisive assessment of the responses on the part of artists and ideologues to the specific social, political and ideological exigencies of the Depression. It is his contention, and one that I share, that it was probably inevitable that the desire to forge a new politics, a new economy, and a new philosophy would be accompanied by an effort to create a new form of art and a new conception of the artist's role in American life.¹⁰⁷¹ While such efforts have often been marginalized — or frankly ignored — within the existing literature on the period, I have sought to demonstrate that an exploration of the diversity of political positions and aesthetic strategies contributes to a new understanding of the complexities circumscribing the cultural field during the 1930s.

By the end of the decade, the Popular Front's position had become difficult to defend following a series of shocking revelations about Soviet Stalinism, namely the Moscow Trials of 1936-1938, the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact in 1939, and the invasion of Finland in 1940.¹⁰⁷² Such revelations discredited the Soviet regime and, as sympathy for it waned, the solidarity of the Popular Front was fractured.¹⁰⁷³ Ironically, it was just at this moment that Communists and fellow-travellers had come to wholeheartedly celebrate government patronage for the arts, taking "satisfaction and pride in the work of the arts projects" and lauding "the tremendous effects" of New Deal initiatives within the cultural sphere.¹⁰⁷⁴ Similarly, artistic modernism had begun to receive a heightened degree of critical support within leftist circles, as was evinced in 1938 when Weinstock sent a letter to *New Masses* defending modernist practices against what he deemed to be the reactionary and philistine objections of readers's letters. As he stated: "I have no dispute with the taste of your correspondents but I

¹⁰⁷¹ Pells, *Radical Visions*, p. 151.

¹⁰⁷² All of these events were reported in different ways by the left-wing press, giving rise to heated polemics in the pages of journals and magazines such as *Partisan Review*, *The New Republic*, *New Masses*, and *The Nation*.

¹⁰⁷³ Judy Kutulas, *The Long War: The Intellectual People's Front and Anti-Stalinism, 1930-1940* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995).

¹⁰⁷⁴ Starobin, "The US Arts Projects," *NM* 31 (16 May 1939), pp. 12; 14.

should like to know how they come to speak for the people.”¹⁰⁷⁵ The essence of “great art,” he argued, from the earliest ballads, to the work and ceremonial songs of Lorca and Mayakovsky, from prehistoric cave paintings to Picasso’s *Guernica*, was “the radical transformation of nature.”¹⁰⁷⁶ As he concluded, there was nothing un-Marxist about difficult art, for “art is no easier than life.”¹⁰⁷⁷ As the decade came to a close however, life for those on the left was to become increasingly difficult. For modernists with Marxist political allegiances, it would no longer be their aesthetics that they had to defend so fiercely, but their politics.

As the US emerged victorious from the Second World War the economic and social dislocations that characterized the Depression began to subside and, as American capitalism soared to new heights, the “doctrine” of newly-elected President Harry Truman ushered in the Cold War and a socio-political milieu marked by widespread anti-Communism. It was, of course, during the 1940s that the modernist left went into decline. The reasons for this are to be found both inside the left and within the broader social and political field. The splitting of the left into warring camps, the ending of the Popular Front, and the winding down of the federal art projects coincided. Taken together, these developments significantly transformed the context for cultural activity. The dénouement in the history of the FAP and the subsequent phasing out of leftist public murals by 1943 is well known, and I will not rehash that history here. Yet while a body of scholarship exists on American art and politics in the 1940s the focus of ‘revisionist’ work to date has been on the emergence and development of Abstract Expressionism, paying little attention to other forms of modernist practice that continued simultaneously.¹⁰⁷⁸ Moreover, the influence of Greenberg and the anti-

¹⁰⁷⁵ Weinstock [Humboldt], “Ivory Tower or Hole in the Ground,” *NM* 27.9 (24 May 1938), p. 20.

¹⁰⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷⁸ I am referring here to revisionist art-historical works such as David Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent During the McCarthy Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997); Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Nancy Jahec, *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*. For a compilation of key writings concerning ongoing debates about Abstract Expressionism and modernist

Stalinist left has in large part determined what has been considered to be of aesthetic value and, by extension, worthy of study in standard art-historical narratives.¹⁰⁷⁹ Even scholars such as Serge Guilbaut, who claims to be concerned with “the political and cultural implications of the period,” present an all-too-restricted view, making Trotskyism seem as though it were the necessary precondition for the development of postwar modernism.

While the scope of my project will not allow much in the way of elaboration, the conclusions of Guilbaut’s study, which remains an important contribution to the historiography of the period, needs to be qualified by a recognition and acknowledgement of several significant factors. Firstly, his stated desire to “dwell on the ‘apolitical’ years sandwiched between two periods when art was directly and overtly associated with politics, on the years between the ‘social art’ of the Depression and the use of abstract expressionism as propaganda in the fifties,” is well-taken in that these years were certainly not “apolitical” and require further sustained attention; but at the same time, his focus on the “de-marxization” of this period overlooks the fact that the ending of the Popular Front did not mark the end of Communist influence in the cultural milieu and that important artists and critics sympathetic to modernism continued to be involved to a great extent with Marxism during the 1940s.¹⁰⁸⁰ Secondly, his contention that “after 1940” the interests of the leading painters and intellectuals was no longer focused on the issue of the artist’s relation to the masses is misconceived. Not only does history not conform to such neat chronological divisions, but the discourses around art, the public, and the state that developed in the 1930s did not simply wither away with the ending of the federal art projects, nor was the shift

art history, see Francis Francina, ed., *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, 2nd ed. (1985; New York: Routledge, 2000), especially pp. 113-226.

¹⁰⁷⁹ On the “New York Intellectuals,” as the anti-Stalinist left came to be called, see Terry Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals: Partisan Review and its Circle, 1934-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986) and Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Fall of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

¹⁰⁸⁰ Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, p. 2. Reviews of this study include Hills, [Book Review], *AAAJ* 24.1 (1984), pp. 26-9; Juliet Steyn, [Book Review], *OAJ* 7.2 (1985), pp. 60-64; and Robert Asahina, “Opiate of the People: What Abstract Expressionism Doesn’t Express,” *Art and Antiques* (March 1984), pp. 105-107.

from “social concerns” to “individual concerns” accepted and effected without a fight.¹⁰⁸¹ As Hemingway observes, “It would be naive to imagine that model of artistic production in which so much had been invested both materially and ideologically would simply fade away without a struggle.”¹⁰⁸² Thirdly, Guilbaut’s overarching focus on the emergence and development of Abstract Expressionism overshadows the fact that the New York art world continued to be characterized by a far greater degree of pluralism than he allows for and “modernism” remained a capacious category that was not nearly so narrowly defined as he suggests. More specifically, his assertion that Schapiro’s “Nature of Abstract Art” essay manifested “the first sign of a thaw in the frozen opposition between idealist formalism and socialist realism” is simply incorrect. Not only had artists such as Davis and Gorky explicitly addressed this issue prior to 1937, but Guilbaut’s positing of an “opposition” between modernism and realism is *exactly* what much of my own study has been arguing against.¹⁰⁸³

As I have sought to demonstrate, not only was modernism not a unitary category and thus able to accommodate both idealist and materialist strains of practice, but there were a significant number of artists and critics on the left who regarded modernist formal strategies as a resource which could (and in some instances *should*) be deployed in the development of socially-committed and politically radical art. Furthermore, he invokes this simple polarity to dismiss the murals of the 1930s as “the propaganda works [read realist] and decorative art [read modernist] fostered by the WPA.”¹⁰⁸⁴ While such assertions are an improvement on Guilbaut’s own earlier claims that the Popular Front “vigorously opposed” any form of artistic experimentation and that the 1940s witnessed “the complete disintegration of Marxism,” surely such conclusions obscure more than they reveal, and in so doing

¹⁰⁸¹ Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, p. 46.

¹⁰⁸² Hemingway, “The Debate on Art and the State in Post-War America” in Francis Ames-Lewis and Piotr Paszkiewicz, eds, *Art and Politics* (Warsaw: Institute of Art, 1999), p. 154. While Leja provides an alternative narrative, this is an area of scholarship where much remains to be recovered and analysed. On Leja see Hemingway, “The Two Paths,” *OAJ* 19.1 (1996), pp. 113-121.

¹⁰⁸³ Hemingway also posits that Guilbaut’s discussion of Schapiro is based on a misreading; see “Meyer Schapiro and Marxism,” p. 20.

¹⁰⁸⁴ Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, p. 196.

leave unanswered some of the more pressing questions that still demand a response, not least of which is why a *single* type of modernist artistic practice came to dominate the critical and commercial field — why Abstract Expressionism became *the* preeminent marker of American abstract painting. Such a turn of events was not self-evident, nor was it inevitable and uncontested.¹⁰⁸⁵ As Davis observed, “Formalism is no more an essential aspect of abstract art than it is of any other school of painting.”¹⁰⁸⁶

That being said, I want to briefly return to Davis, who presents a particularly poignant example of how things were nonetheless changing in the 1940s. During the late 1930s he was both a Marxist and an anti-Trotskyite, and he remained committed to the Popular Front until 1939. By the early 1940s, however, he had grown critical of the Party.¹⁰⁸⁷ Shortly after being forced off the FAP in 1939 (as a result of new regulations restricting length of employment), Davis resigned from the American Artists’ Congress in 1940 in the wake of internal disputes.¹⁰⁸⁸ No longer able to support himself through state-funded initiatives, he was forced, once again, to rely on the commercial art market. By 1941 he had re-established ties with dealer Edith Halpert, with whom he had broken in 1936, having become increasingly disillusioned with the gallery and private patronage system. In 1943, Halpert mounted a solo show of his work at her Downtown Gallery, the first in nine years. While he carried on his political battles in the pages of his personal journals and in his lectures at the New School for Social Research (where he took a position in 1940), the activist character of his participation in the cultural milieu diminished. As Ad Reinhardt commented in a

¹⁰⁸⁵ Guilbaut, “The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America: Greenberg, Pollock, or from Trotsysim to the New Liberalism of the ‘Vital Center,’” *October* 15 (Winter 1980), pp. 61-78; this article appeared before his book-length study.

¹⁰⁸⁶ Davis, “Stuart Davis Criticizes Critic of Abstract Art,” *New York Post*, 25 February 1938.

¹⁰⁸⁷ The Party was also to grow more critical of modernist practices. As Hemingway notes, while during the thirties “party organs might endorse work in a range of styles when it was opportune to do so, the underlying commitment was to a realist style and readily comprehensible message;” this position shifted in the 1940s and support for modernism was curbed as the Party began to launch increasingly hostile attacks against abstraction following the expulsion of Browder in 1946. See Hemingway, “Fictional Unities,” p. 111.

¹⁰⁸⁸ On Davis’s resignation from the Congress and the break-up of the organization see Monroe, “The American Artists’ Congress,” pp. 14-20 and “Davis Explains His Resignation from Artists’ Congress,” *NYT*, 14 April 1940.

review of Davis's 1945 retrospective at MoMA — an institution which only a few years earlier Davis had characterized as a “burocracy [sic] of filing clerks and fraternity house lounge lizards ruled over by a clique of Fascist capitalists” — Davis “had always known the value of group activity . . . and was once conspicuous in the organized combating of Fascism, bigotry, narrow political and aesthetic ideas.” But as Reinhardt lamented, by the mid-1940s Davis's “present political inactivity and his lack of relation to the artists' groups is regrettable for a painter of his integrity and stature.”¹⁰⁸⁹

The conjunction of modernist aesthetics and leftist politics within the context of the New Deal had pointed to an alternative vision of cultural modernity, and in 1940, despite his growing sense of disappointment and disillusionment, Davis still thought it worth noting that the particular constellation of ideas represented by “democracy in art,” “abstract styles,” and “Federal support of art” ensured that “American painting unquestionably has the potentialities of a great future.”¹⁰⁹⁰ But a future premised upon these terms was not to be realized. Perhaps these elements are necessarily contingent, each upon the other, such that if one term is removed from the equation — “Federal support of art” — then another term — “democracy in art” — collapses in its absence.

While this narrative is commonly interpreted as one of defeat — which it undeniably is, alternatively it may be approached as one demonstrating that, if only for a brief moment in the history of American art, there was widespread belief that the use of modernist forms was consonant with a radical political perspective; that realism and abstraction, rather than pitted in a simplistic oppositional polarity, were engaged in reciprocally defining relationships; that the state was a better guarantor of a democratic culture than the market; and that the masses had a right to art as part of their everyday lives. Indeed, the murals produced by modernists on the left offered a very different set of aesthetic and ideological priorities from those that were ultimately

¹⁰⁸⁹ Davis Papers, [1940?]; Ad Reinhardt, “About Artists by Artists: Stuart Davis,” *NM* 57.9 (27 November 1945), reprinted as “Review of Stuart Davis Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (1945)” in Kelder, *Stuart Davis*. p. 196.

¹⁰⁹⁰ Davis, “Abstract Painting Today,” p. 125.

canonized by the postwar establishment, and this is precisely what makes them such important objects of art-historical inquiry. As Berman suggests, "It may turn out, then, that going back can be a way to go forward," that remembering the earlier modernisms of the twentieth century can not only augment our understanding of past experiences, but of present ones, and in so doing furnish us with "the vision and the courage to create the modernisms of the twenty-first."¹⁰⁹¹

¹⁰⁹¹ Berman, *All That's Solid*, p. 36.

Appendix: Key to Journal and Periodical Abbreviations

<i>AF</i>	Art Front
<i>AAAJ</i>	Archives of American Art Journal
<i>CA</i>	Creative Art
<i>DW</i>	Daily Worker
<i>MA</i>	Magazine of Art
<i>NM</i>	New Masses
<i>NYT</i>	The New York Times
<i>OAJ</i>	Oxford Art Journal
<i>PR</i>	Partisan Review
<i>TNR</i>	The New Republic

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